



messages in a bottle
A DREDGE FANZINE

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To Whomever Reads This,

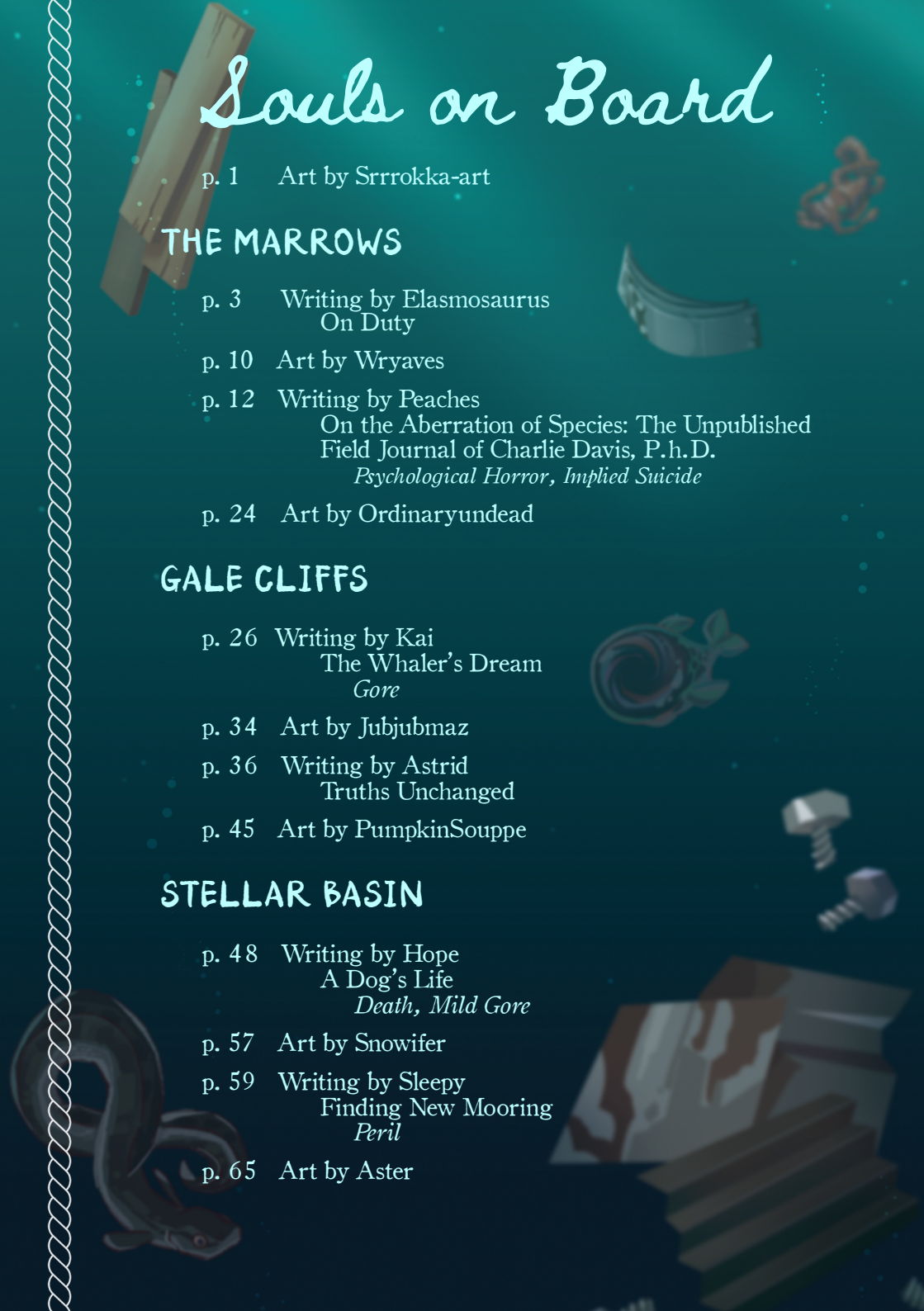
My ship is dead.

I write this as her steel groans and her nails judder. Passengers scramble to collect their writings: scraps of the past, findings from the present. Stories they are desperate to tell, even as we become stories ourselves.

It follows us. Brain tissue pulsing in a cage of bone atop its head, the mind of a living crown seeking escape. The body's hull creaks in the waves and guides us to oblivion.

The water swallows our bones. Seek carefully. Do not call the name of my ship. Do not remind the sea of what it keeps.

-The Captain



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On Duty

Elasmosaurus

Dusk's golden pink hues saturate the horizon as the Lighthouse Keeper hurries up the path. Venturing out for food should have been fine this evening, but the return of that dreadful Fisherman and his wife spelled trouble. She *knew* it. Couldn't quite tell you how, but she did. Them dredging the deep, with that crew...

It would only end in trouble.

No matter, it's the Mayor's job to sort all that, and she trusts him well enough. The area relies so heavily on tourism; he wouldn't do anything to harm it. Not when they all knew the legends, had seen the unexplainable fossils. Those boys ought to have known better. Would've socked them round the ear if they'd been hers, but she'd never had cause to have one. Not when her job's her life. Not when so many already depend on her.

Besides, the hermit life suits her fine, mostly. She'd built a rapport with the Fishmonger, and the Mayor was some sort of cousin on her father's side, and the scant conversations she'd had outside the pair of them did her perfectly well thank you very much. She likes the quiet of the Lighthouse, a solitary sanctuary carrying only the sounds of the sea. The Lighthouse's boundary is marked by a fence with a gate, whose bent hinges still cling to the reinforced wood. Her predecessors gave up on repairing it, and she honours their expertise by crossing through the little gap in the fence. Her own little escape. It fills the Lighthouse Keeper with a sense of peace that echoes through her very core. From the outside she admires her handiwork: routine maintenance to repaint the flaking outside, ravaged by salt and wind. The lines of red and white are near

perfect; her choice to focus on the leeward side had seemed sensible given the usual winds at this time of year, though the weather had been oddly still, moisture hanging in the air to prevent the poor paint from drying. (She'd ruined her favourite coat when discovering the continued wetness of the paint. An annoyance she couldn't fix.)

The next part she does by rote: all her shopping finds its rightful home in the kitchen except the pieces she needs to make her humble dinner of cheese and pickle sandwiches, and a flask of hot tea. She checks the paintbrushes—not quite clean from yesterday's painting. The red and white cans of paint are nearly immaculate. The only way to tell them apart is a single drip of paint from one of the cans, a line of red that dried before reaching the floor (she'd ensured as much, she meticulously removed all excess paint on the *inside* of the can). Her logbook's in the driftwood desk located by the stairs, the most sensible place for it to be. She retrieves the lighthouse logs and a handwritten book that's as weathered as the building itself, tatty with indents worn to fit her fingers perfectly. Pencils are common sense around water—she'll never change to one of those ridiculous pens that smudge the moment it even threatens to rain—and she tucks a spare behind her ear in case of emergencies.

Then, she ascends.

It's slow work. A mindless spiralling drudgery that she relishes, an opportunity to switch off and let her mind wander. Normally, that would be a good thing. Tonight...tonight she indulges in ridiculous ghost stories. Ugh, that dratted Fisherman's gotten into her head. "Unexplainable fossils"? Utter nonsense. She knows it's nonsense, the young lady who stopped by on her way to the Basin to research the fish there had told her as much, and she didn't entertain silly stories about impossible creatures. The odd shape of the bones were just different animals laid down on top of each other that people were trying to say was the same creature. Or, it could be the work of nature. Poor misshapen animals, doomed not to survive their



first winter, or whatever the sea's equivalent was. Like the Farmer's poor, deformed kitten. A work of twisted nature, not some dark mystical power that the drunkards theorise runs through these parts.

There are no such things as ghosts, or devils, or leviathans large enough to swallow a boat whole. There are only nonsense stories.

Still, she trusts herself, her own eyes, and the eyes of her forebears. And the tattered book filled with their handwriting tells strange tales indeed. Her job here is to monitor for "oddities" in the sea (though no one ever specified what that meant), keep the light, and check the curiosities locked up in the chest by the lamp. An assortment of diaries scrawled so frantically the contents are gibberish, a map that points to the bottom of the sea, and an anchored cross "for luck" to weigh them down in the chest. Her first job upon summiting is to check the chest. It needs a polish—tomorrow's job—but otherwise looks fine, the well oiled hinges resistant to the salt's corrosion. Then the Lighthouse keeper inspects the contents, finds them all present. The map, she knows, is the most treasured possession in the chest. Her predecessor had told her tales of treasures best left buried, had intimated that the map led to the Marrows' doom.

The sharp rocks at the base of its cliffs are a far worse threat in her opinion, so she turns to her next task: the light. She tops up the paraffin needed to keep the light burning bright and clean. Clean!? Pah. Paraffin burns dirty, marks up the lens something nasty but she'd dedicated all of Thursday to scrubbing the soot from the lens so it was still shiny for now.

Her penultimate task is to crank the lamp to keep it turning, though she'll have to repeat this task through the night. And finally, with all the other bits done, she settles in for her final task: to watch.

It had been an unseasonably warm day apart from that strong onshore breeze, and the Lighthouse Keeper's grateful for her warm coat as the sun begins to set. She just wishes her hat would do more to drown out the grating jeers from the harbour. How loud must they be, for the noise to carry all the way up here? Do they have no sense of decency?

She sighs, turning her attention away from the land. There's white foam on the wave crests, but no whale sprays to be seen. A few boats she doesn't recognise are a little further away than she'd like, but they'd be back home soon enough, wherever their home might be. Every thirty minutes she recranks the light and returns to her seat, sipping her tea, eyes scanning the faraway horizon between.

It starts while her back is turned, as she attends to the crank. The sea's closer somehow, the shifting shades of sunset muted. She shivers, hugging herself to keep warm. The next time she cranks the light and returns to her chair, the island to the east is partially obscured, and she realises: a sea fog! Of course! The weather had been perfect for it. She can see the vapour in the air now, eddies of fake cloud swirling playfully above the water.

The Lighthouse Keeper greets the enveloping fog with the same friendly glee as she had when she was six. A white blanket covering the sea between her and Little Marrow, enveloping her in a familiar embrace. Fogs like this come rarely in a lifetime, and she loves the peace it brings, dampening the cheers from the harbour. Except—oh! The lamp! Oh, she *had* been silly!

The cold's already setting into her bones; she's stiff as she scrambles up and shuffles over to the light's settings. She fiddles until the light flashes in six short bursts every ten seconds, the Marrows' fog setting, and settles back into her chair to make notes in the logbook.

Duty summarily dealt with, she lets her eyes drift back to the wall of white before her. The sun's dying light fails to burn through the

haze, though the lighthouse light pierces its depths. The fog thickens, swirls curling around each other as they drift towards Greater Marrow. Steadily it picks up pace, until the fog is rushing towards her, and she remembers her mother's words:

Never trust the fog. It plays nice, pretends to be your friend, until it claws at the land and you can't even see your hands held an inch from your nose. We live off the sea, we understand the sea. She gives and she takes, fair is fair. Fog, though? Fog's merciless, all take, desperate to drag people to their deaths.

Suddenly, the familiar embrace of the fog turns cold. Cloying. Constricting. Swirling eddies of vapour form talons scraping at the Lighthouse, tearing at the coastline to crawl forward—claiming the Marrows as its own. White tendrils drag themselves over the land, unescapable, inevitable.

They're cut off. The Lighthouse Keeper can't see anything outside the lighthouse, can only see the powerful beams reflected back in an impenetrable wall extending everywhere. Ice grips at her heart. *Were all the boats in?*

At least the winds aren't strong. Even if the skippers can't see, they won't have to fight nature to avoid the rocks. They'll be fine.

They'll be fine.

They'll be *fine*.

Even as she repeats herself, she doesn't believe. The chill in her heart spreads to her bones, a dull ache that settles deep in her core and strips all light, warmth, hope. It's dark now, the last of the sun's rays fully eclipsed, or maybe by now it's the moonlight she's being starved of, cut off from everything.

It's deadly silent. Eerie. She could scream and no one would hear, the fog would fill her mouth, choke its way down her throat until it filled her lungs with sea and drowned her on land. The air's frigid,

too cold, hits like blades at the back of her throat and she coughs, sputters, wheezes.

She manages one easy breath before the stabbing sensation radiates again. Her skin's too small, too big, every fibre from her clothes grating against her. She's lost, dying, dead, *wrong*.

The Lighthouse Keeper glances up at the light: steadfast, anchoring. Beams scatter in every direction; a shining beacon in the gloom. Air flows freely, painlessly, into her lungs now.

That word echoes, reverberates in her head: wrong, wrong, wrong.

And it is wrong. Everywhere the light doesn't touch, the fog's turned crimson, a mist of blood heavy in the air. Fluorescent flashes of aberrated bioluminescence appear in localised circles, increasing in intensity as *something* congregates together then disappears to the depths as quickly as it appeared. The Lighthouse Keeper takes a deep breath. None of this is real. It can't be. *They were only stories.*

She blinks, willing away the tricks her eyes are playing.

A thousand red eyes in the fog blink back.





On the Aberration of Species

The Unpublished Field Journal of Charlie Davis, Ph.D.

Peaches

Foreword

By a friend

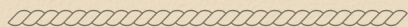
I first met Dr. Charlie Davis in Dr. Smith's *Ecology of Fishes* lecture hall at the start of term at Ironhaven College. As first year students in our graduate program, I think both of us felt immense pressure to succeed. Dr. Smith was famously a difficult professor and would often have us present spontaneously on various topics in front of the class. I never did well—the stuttering bumblebee fish that I am—and often my results took a toll on my overall marks. However, while I was struggling with differing views of remineralization and nutrient cycling in coastal marine ecosystems, Charlie knew exactly what he wanted out of our program from the first day.

As nervous as I was about presenting findings, Charlie never made me feel as if I did not belong. I remember clearly, he asked me, “Can you show me your thought process on the model you used?” Naturally, I thought far too little of myself than I ought to as a Ph.D. student, and he offered me easy encouragement: “I’ve never thought of that before. I want to learn from you.” I think that bit of encouragement brought me enough confidence to finish my degree.

That of course, was Charlie. He was unendingly brilliant, but generous with his ideas and kindness.

This book collects the work that many of my colleagues and I feel define his legacy: insights into the beginning of marine discoveries

we will never get to see the end to, and the contents of the scientific field journal he was so passionate about.



6th July 1928

Researcher: C. Davis

Location: Little Marrow

Weather: Sunny, 12°C

Visibility: ~15 meters

Observations:

06:50 – The fog that set in last night has lifted. No disturbances on the water.

08: 43 – A school of *S. australasicus* has formed on the southeastern ridge of Little Marrow, but nothing appears abnormal.

16: 52 – Visibility is lowering significantly, though not considered a strange occurrence for this time of year. The captain has advised that we head back to port. Visibility lowered to ~8 meters.

Since last year, my Colleague—who, like me, hails from these parts in the Marrows—and I have been hearing reports of new species sightings. We were inspired by our other colleague who has set up a research station on a nearby cluster of islands at Stellar Basin for a similar purpose. She and I teamed up as field

researchers for Ironhaven College when we heard of the prospect of returning to our hometown to discover these new species in hopes of recording them first. What they are, what could have caused them, and what they could be—all things we wish to know the answer to.

At this time, it is impossible to know just how many potential new species of fish we may encounter, or even if they are truly fish. Indeed, we have heard whisperings of cephalopods and crustaceans being sighted within the immediate area belonging to unknown species. Thus, for the purposes of this journal, I will simply be recording my own observations and any novel species we discover. Perhaps in the future, we may use the data gathered to decipher the meaning of their sudden appearance.

14th July 1928

Location: Little Marrow

Weather: Clear skies, 14°C

Visibility: ~12 meters

Observations:

08:50 – Bright, water is clear, schools of fish visible through the water.

16:59 – Visibility is lowering (~8 meters). Captain went out further than we originally planned.

19:24 – Spotted a peculiar glowing spot in between Greater and Little Marrow. Upon closer observation, a school of what look to be *P. colias* was swimming in sporadic shapes. We manage to catch one: a fellow with massive eyes.

20:46 – Visibility is gone (~1 meter, but that is generous). Minutes ago, rocks appeared from nowhere, and the *Nautilus* almost

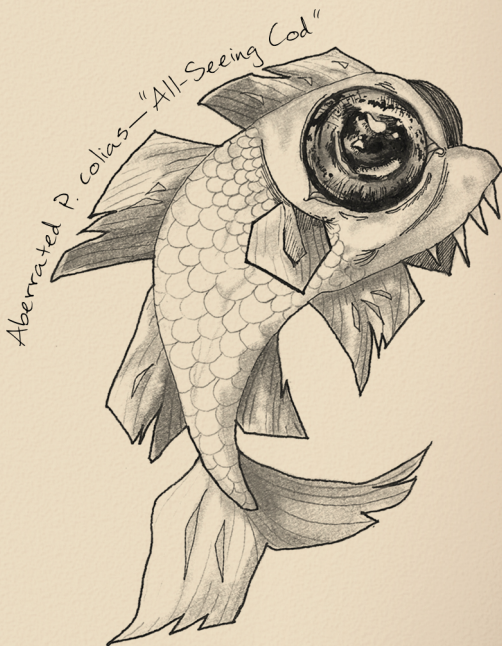
crashed into them just as we were nearing the dock at Little Marrow.

My Colleague mentioned this evening that I may have polished my belt buckle a tad too much, and it tends to reflect an inordinate amount of light. She has stated, half in jest, that I care far more about its shine than I do about the research. It catches more light than is advisable in the field, likely scaring off the specimens we hope to observe. She may have a point, but this buckle was a gift from my father, who had it engraved with my initials after I graduated from Ironhaven College. It's hard not to be sentimental. In any case, her concern has been rendered moot, since we did encounter a new species.

I suppose you could call my belt buckle a good luck charm.

This odd creature appears to be an aberrated form of *P. colias*. Its general shape surely mirrors that of a cod...if said cod had spent too much time swimming inside the viscous contents of a polluted reservoir. Its eyes are bulbous and uncomfortably wide—staring into my eyes with a look that I can only describe as hyper-intelligent judgement. I cannot be sure, but there's a certain unsettling wisdom in its gaze, as though it is critiquing my life choices.

I feel that it sees all, knows all. The "All-Seeing Cod" if you will. Perhaps it knows far more of the depths than man can ever know. And perhaps it knows why the chef fed us a poor cut of its brethren for lunch.



21st July 1928

The *Nautilus* needed repairs after our little tiff with the rocks the other night. A proper skid on the hull had rendered her useless until now. Anyway, the captain needed a break, and so did my Colleague and I. Going out onto the ocean nearly every day for weeks started to take a toll on us. My Colleague—sprightly and handsome as she is—can only take so much sailing before she'd rather have a meal with me at the local restaurant situated in Greater Marrow's town.

I, for one, did not complain, as she is a wonderful conversationalist.

I also took this as an opportunity to reconnect with my old friend, the Fishmonger. He is several years older than I, but since I was well acquainted with his son at school, and he considers my father a close friend, we spent quite a lot of time together in my youth.

My Colleague suggested that we go to the Fishmonger for a second opinion, maybe even take notes on whether he has seen any aberrated fish, like the Cod, as of late. She was right to suggest this because the Fishmonger said that fishermen have started to sell him odd catches recently but that he did not know what to make of them.

"And you bought these fish?" I asked him.

He replied easily. "Of course. They look interesting enough to eat."

Tonight, we dined on an unusual delicacy in the form of a new variety of aberrated *P. colias* that I did not have the fortune to catch myself. A three-headed cod, aptly named by my Colleague, the "Three-Headed Cod."

The specimen was dead when I first laid eyes on it. A shame, really, for I do wonder what it would look like alive. Would it thrash

together as one, three minds in one body?

In any case, beer and batter made this fellow a treat. The taste was so powerful I felt my mind awaken.

30th July 1928

Location: Greater Marrow

Weather: Cloudy, 13°C

Visibility: ~10 meters

Observations:

18:02 – Noted what could be a pair of *G. thyrsoideus* skimming the shores of Greater Marrow's harbor. We stop here to see if we might catch and observe any.

21:56 – We move further out of the harbor, attracted by disturbed water where it is known locally to be a popular fishing ground for *S. australasicus*. We stop here to set our lines and observe.

23:38 – A fog has settled in, and the fog light flickers as we sail. The sound of crows caws from all sides, echoing from an unknown source.

Today, our crew sailed later than the recommended hours. My Colleague and I had begun to suspect that the new species weren't surfacing during daylight. This theory was confirmed by the Fishmonger, who remarked that such aberrant species were elusive, and rarely seen in the sunlit shallows.

Fishermen around these parts avoid the water at night. I grew up with the stories—warnings, really—that spoke of the ocean's nighttime dangers. In fishing towns like the Marrows, it is not

uncommon to hear of these kinds of superstitions. My grandfather, for example, never left shore without a miniature statue of the Old Man of the Sea. Even our captain was hesitant to go without “protection” at night, but the allure of being the one to ferry a pair of marine biologists out to sea to discover new species was far too great...and so, perhaps, was the idea of a larger grant. Though his worries were not unfounded, we did encounter new species this time around. The cold settled in just as night did. Mist curled low over the water in ways that defied the wind, and the night stilled the sea as if it was holding its breath. Despite the eerie eyes of night, we accomplished much.



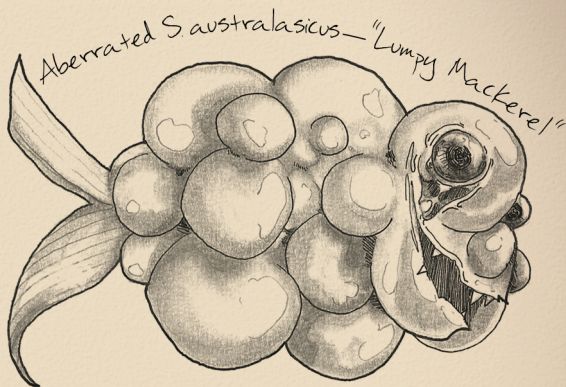
The first specimen we caught appears to be a warped cousin of *G. thyrsoideus*. Its spine protrudes at an awkward angle. I couldn't help but compare it (unfairly, perhaps) to my grandmother's scoliosis. The thing has sharp points and crooked curves which are unlike any gray eel I have ever seen. And its teeth snap with every twitch of its wriggling body, as if personally offended by my Colleague who was the unlucky soul to drag it out of the net. Possibly seeking revenge on her fingers.

A snake-like barbed menace, this one. I reckon “Barbed Eel” would do for a name, but my Colleague wishes to call it “Judy” after her snappish twin sister.

The second specimen we caught tonight is a grotesque thing that is more of a writhing mass of lumps than *S*.

australasicus. It resembles the unfortunate aftermath of someone who's had raw offal for dinner right before an inadvisable night of mixing spirits and

beer. How long can it have lived like this? I'd call this one a "Lumpy Mackerel," partly for its appearance, partly out of fear that if I get too creative, I'll have to keep looking at it longer than necessary.



Intrusively, I can't help but think of how delicious a typical blue mackerel tastes. I am curious as to how this one might fare in a broiler.

11th August 1928

Location: Greater Marrow

Weather: Clear, 12°C

Visibility: ~11 meters

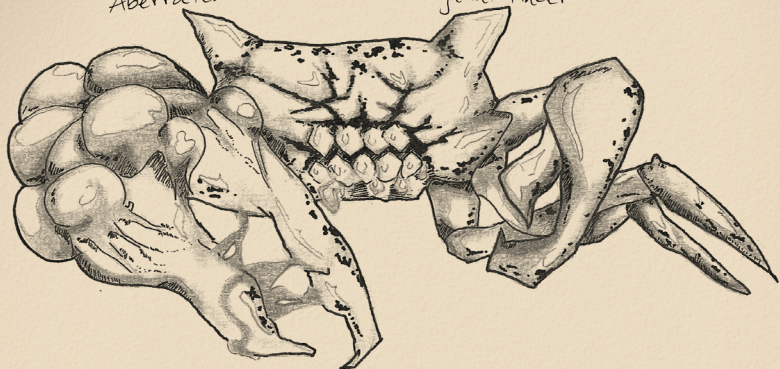
Observations:

19:10 – Clear over the water. Minimal mist.

21:46 – We check the crab pot. Its contents shimmer with a green light. I see that we have caught something.

23:57 – A creak disturbs the cargo hold, and a chill settles onto the boat.

Aberrated *T. arcuata*—"Malignant Pincer"



The specimen we pulled from the crab pot is a glowing aberrated form of *T. arcuata*. Green light emits from the pulsating growths along its joints and cracks, giving it the look of a child's worst imagined closet monster. Its massive claw fights with the rest of its body, as if its own pincer hates being attached.

I can only imagine the Fishmonger's reaction to this impressive creature—I'm sure he has never seen such an ornery fiddler crab. He did not loan us this crab pot so much as shove the contraption into our hands with a watery grin. "Perhaps this will help you catch some more...interesting specimens," he said with a hungry glint in his eyes.

My Colleague and I had already made plans to check if the crustaceans in the area were also affected by these strange phenomena, but not until next week. The Fishmonger's eagerness for the taste of aberrated crab pushed our timeline forward.

"Malignant Pincer" is a fitting name for this new aberration, for there is nothing pleasant about its sharp teeth stuck in that feral grin. My Colleague says that she doesn't know whether she wants to study it or apologize to it out of pity.

I apologized to it later, after we steamed it.

31st August 1928

Location: Little Marrow

Weather: Clear, 9°C

Visibility: ~6 meters

Observations:

00:04 – We head out to sea. The air is calm; the mist is thick.

01:27 – Is that *N. sloanii* in the depths? I want to go to it.

03:19 – We finally catch *N. sloanii*.

Every day, we start later. I do not complain, because the discoveries are vast and the adventure is strong.

I forgot what we caught tonight. Was it *N. sloanii*? Was it an aberrated form? I have vague memories of tentacles sprouting from a glowing core and a gelatinous sac. Chewy, I think. A scrumptious arrow squid specimen. If I remember where I put it. Was it in my mouth?

I believe we decided to cook it. I do love interesting textures like bubbles bursting and an explosion of tactile flavor.

My Colleague whispers things. Brilliant things. Funny things. Who is the voice she seeks? She says she wants all of us to be friends.

13th September 1928

Location: Somewhere near Little Marrow

Weather: Partly cloudy, 6°C

Visibility: ~2 meters

Observations:

03:13 – Cold.

04:09 – Colder.

The sea is endless. I don't recall how long we've been out here. Days? Weeks? *M. bonaci* made it into our net. I like this one. It looks like a pig—a giant, fat, tusked grouper. Delicious. The captain enjoyed this one raw.

14th September 1928

01:12 – The eyes speak.

02:54 – I hear a splash from my bunk.

She jumped. I saw her shadow and reached out to her in a panic. I was too late.

I cannot seek her body in the darkness. ~~He follows me everywhere and I listen.~~ The waves whisper my Colleague's name. Or did I, just seconds before I missed her?

She jumped.

???

The taste of that eel...withered from the entity it hosts. I crave it.

???

Everything is clear now. I see the truth. I'll join her.



Afterword

By a friend

We can only speculate about what happened to Dr. Charlie Davis and the crew of the *Nautilus*. I hope that bringing his final words to light will allow some closure.

It is a shame we cannot find out what Charlie would have done with the data he collected, and an even greater shame that the *Nautilus* crashed that night near Little Marrow.

I'd like to thank the captain of the *Sunset* for providing me with my good friend's last work and dredging up what he could of the crew. It is my sincerest hope that we can find the rest of what is left of them.

A stylized illustration of a lighthouse on a rocky island. The lighthouse is tall and cylindrical with alternating red and white horizontal stripes. It has a small lantern room at the top. Two powerful beams of light emanate from the top, forming a large 'V' shape that frames the lighthouse. The background is a dark, stormy sea with a small boat visible on the left. In the foreground, a person with long dark hair, wearing a dark coat and a hat, stands on a rocky outcrop. They are holding a lantern in their right hand and a pair of binoculars in their left. The overall color palette is dominated by dark blues, greys, and reds, with the lighthouse providing a focal point of light and color.

If it is my
destiny,
so be it.

I will be
the witness.

I will be the
distant guide.

I will be
the keeper
of secrets
washed ashore.

Even if it is
a losing battle
against time itself.



The Whaler's Dream

Kai

He knows that he is dreaming as soon as he becomes aware of his surroundings. It is dusk and a wind blows over from the cliffs, yet the shadowed Ingfell docks are deserted—save for the carcass of the whale.

A chain secures the whale's body to the docks. It's a dark mass, yearning to sink into deeper waters. Preventing the whale from sinking is the first priority when whaling. What point would there be to the carnage if the victim just sank to the bottom of the sea? Its anthracite skin is wrinkled and scars reflect the last of the fading daylight in stark white. An old animal, judging by its massive size and the battle scars. It must have been hunted before. Some of the scars are human-made. He thinks he recognises one from his own harpoon, decades old. Stepping towards the posts, he only hears his own boots on the creaking wood, and a clank of the chains, as waves gently lap at the whale's body, bobbing it up and down. No other soul is present. It's just him and the whale.

He knows that he is dreaming because if there was a whale this large, all the town would be here. Flensing, draining, working. Like a treasure chest, the whale's decapitated head is strung up on the pulley-system, already cut open. Spermaceti leaks into the buckets meant to catch it, but nobody is ensuring it does not spill. He steps past the head, avoiding the pools of blood soiling the deck. Blubber and spermaceti are of little concern to a dreaming man - he knows what he is looking for.

His experience allows him to step onto the whale's floating body without trouble. He keeps his balance in the face of the grip the tides have on the body. He feels the give of the bloated tissue through his

boots. He didn't have much time before working on the carcass could prove dangerous. With calculated determination he brandishes his knife, trusty and ancient steel, used by his father and his father's father to do the same exact job, and cuts into the belly of the whale.

The stench of the ruptured innards hits his senses but he has done this thousands of times. He plunges his blade into the organ's surface and slices. The anticipation never changes. His heart-rate picks up and a bead of sweat forms in the palm of his hand, forcing him to adjust his grip on the knife.

It is grim work, to kneel on top of the murdered corpse of the leviathan, arms deep in the flesh of this ancient animal that *he* has killed. He rarely has time to contemplate during his work, but the absence of other whalers leaves a void to be filled with reflection. What does it mean to deprive the world of this creature? He knows of the importance of these animals for the environment, he has read the articles and his father has taught him as well. Don't go for the young ones. You will need them to be bigger, not only for higher profits but also so they can breed, make more whales for you to hunt. He knows that a sunken whale will nourish an entire ecosystem at the bottom of the ocean. What right does he have to slice it open instead, scouring its intestines for the sake of securing the highest bid on potential ambergris?

But Ingfell has mouths to feed, buildings to repair, and elderly to support. What is the town if not an ecosystem as well? What's more, this is his home. He does not dwell at the bottom of the ocean. Had he been born a crab or a nematode he would likely think of this differently, but he is a human surface dweller. And his family has been in the whaling business for generations. So he searches and slices, soiling his gloves in stomach acids and half-digested squid, all in the name of the pale gold that even an experienced whaler such as he had only seen a few times in his life. If he could just find ambergris in the stomach of this whale, Ingfell would be set for at least a few months, maybe even a year.

Finally, he touches a solid lump through the outer wall of the intestine. His heart jumps in his chest, but he refuses to celebrate early and carefully enlarges the opening, so he can take a look at it.

A squid beak with a polished, black surface, larger than his hand, is embedded in the waxy grey mass he has been searching for. The stench is enough to make any regular man sick, but he knows its value. Aging this beauty would turn it into one of the most sought after substances in the world. And it has been found here, in his Ingfell. The money would keep the town afloat for a little while longer.

“Unfortunately, this is all a dream,” he sighs into the open organs of the whale.

“Truly,” the squid’s beak answers.

He jerks back, nearly losing his balance on the floating carcass and almost drops his knife into the depths, but he manages to catch himself. It’s a dream. Of course the dismembered body part of the digested squid is able to talk.

The alien jaw shifts in the clump of ambergris that coats it and wriggles free. It almost seems as if it’s smiling, he thinks, unnerved by the direction this dream is taking.

“You have seen the last of them,” the squid tells him. It’s voice is all snarls and clicks and he isn’t sure where it is coming from, as there is no jugular or tongue to form the words. Yet he hears it clearly, as it continues: “Who will you be, you Whaler sans whales? What will you become?”

“What,” he croaks. “I don’t understand. I’m the Whaler. From Ingfell.”

The ambergris in his hands begins to dissolve, turning into running sand not unlike that of an hourglass. It leaks out and diminishes

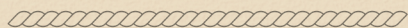
between his fingers. He gasps and reaches for the substance but he suddenly feels slow and sluggish, as if his body is too heavy to listen to him. All he can do is watch as the fruit of his work disappears into the dark ocean below.

He feels the body of the whale begin to sink. The chains that anchor it to the docks are rusty and can't hold it any longer, and he is on top of the carcass, knee-deep in viscera, unable to move. If the whale is sinking, he is also sinking.

The water is cold as it reaches his boots. The cavity he has cut into the whale in his search for ambergris fills up rapidly, and as the whale goes under he is taken with it, down into an early grave at the bottom of the ocean. A brief thought goes to the ecosystem that his body will nourish.

"It is a curse of your own making, Whaler," the beak cackles. It is somehow staying afloat, the black chitin starkly outlined against the surface's last light above. It is scorning and mocking him as it continues its prophecy of ill fate: "They will haunt you and you may search but you will never find a single one again."

His lungs strain and he closes his eyes to invite the depths to take him.



The Whaler awakens with a memory of blood and salt on his lips. He sits up, wipes cold sweat off his brow and orients himself. He is at his work-station, the colourful cardboard hollow of a firecracker in front of him, waiting to be filled. A basket of already finished firecrackers and fireworks sits next to him. He shakes off the ghost of the nightmare. Right. This is what he is doing. He is making fireworks as a gift for his neighbours, whose son is graduating from a mainland university. They are planning to visit

their son to celebrate and fireworks are a must-have for a send-off into proper adulthood. Since there hasn't been a proper whaling expedition in months he has no shortage of gunpowder, so he offered to make some for them. Fireworks aren't what he's usually making in his workshop but he has dabbled before. It is not too different from the explosives he usually makes, he tells himself.

He knows that his neighbours probably aren't coming back. And why would they? Since the last whaling expedition months ago the spotters haven't even seen flukes from a distance. People are at the end of their ropes. Ingfell has always lived from whale to whale. No whales, no Ingfell, is what one of the younger guys said when he packed up his belongings and left for anywhere. Somewhere with whales or just somewhere with labour. Any labour. A lot of people followed.

Now his neighbours. They already put their son through college at great cost. The mainland has many opportunities - a kid with a university degree and a life away from Ingfell is unlikely to return to Ingfell and his parents can probably find a job there too. Why endure the drought and hope for a return to the old times when money and security are a guarantee elsewhere?

In a way the fireworks are a send-off for his neighbours too. He stares at the basket of finished products. He may not like it but he can't blame them.

But he does not want to apply his skills elsewhere. A brief thought goes to what the squid beak said in his dream. He stretches and begins working on the firecracker again.

He will not become anything. He is the Whaler. He makes explosives for whaling. He is not going anywhere.



There is nobody left who is willing to spot. So he stands at the lookout, ready to ring the bell. Every day and most nights he stands and watches the ocean for a sign of disturbance, for a fluke, a breach, a blow in the distance. An eternal staring contest with stormy grey seas.

He knows that nobody will come, even if he rings the bell. Even if he spots a whole pod - there is nobody left to answer.

Even his own brother has left Ingfell. He even took the whalebone crest with him that has been in the family for generations. The empty spot on the wall seems to bleed like an open wound, so he avoids the living room. Their family was made up of proud Whalers, all of them. Except his cowardly brother, who dared fleeing from the place their family has been rooted for generations and dared taking the heirloom with him. Stealing a piece of the whales Ingfell is now deprived of. What a cruel joke.

His gaze drifts across the dark ocean. It is a cold morning and the calm waves lap against the shore below the watchtower as the rising sun paints the clouds with broad, bloody strokes. He is wrapped in his woolen blanket, encrusted with salt and morning frost. It's gotten cold. Winter is approaching. He is stubborn but his body is growing older every day. He feels like a machine left inert, becoming dull from disuse. The town is an empty shell. He is the last Whaler of Ingfell.

He looks over to the abandoned houses, some already falling into disrepair, and sees the Ingfell Resident walk her dog along the promenade in the distance. She does not understand his plight but at least she shares in his occupation of this desolate place. He decides to get up and greet her, as no whale will grace him with its presence, never again, if the beak from that distant dream is to be believed.

His limbs feel rusty and he realises that he has not moved in hours, maybe days. He is not worried, the feeling of the lookout has

become familiar to his body and he is not frail. Yet the grime and moisture have formed a coagulant on the steps of the ladder and somehow he slips.

As he rushes towards the ground, the Whaler thinks that he has been falling for longer than he has realised. Falling, sinking, like in that dream. Since the last whale, throughout the exodus. He has not seen or spoken to his old friends in months. His brother is gone and he does not think he will ever see him again. What a joke, this mania of his. All to prove something to himself and a squid beak from his dream.

Yet in the end, the Whaler cannot escape his dependence on the whales. With their disappearance his life is over. He has not been the Whaler in months. He just hadn't realised yet.

He lands in the sand, the air is knocked out of his lungs and he reels from shock and pain for a moment. Nothing is broken, he got lucky. Or maybe he got unlucky. The sky above him swirls in spirals of grey and white, the morning illuminating the clouds above.

The head of the Ingfell Resident's dog appears in his field of view. What he can see of his reflection in its eyes looks pathetic, not at all like the proud man he felt he was just this morning. Or was it yesterday? It feels like a lifetime has passed. What would his father think of the man he is becoming?

"Are you alright?," the dog's owner asks, a moment later, slightly out of breath. She must have seen him fall and rushed to come to his aid.

"I'm going home." says the Retired Whaler and slowly gets up. He dusts off his clothes and grabs his blanket.

"That might be for the best," the Ingfell Resident says. "Let me know if you need anything, yes?"

The Retired Whaler nods but his mind is elsewhere. His head is spinning but not from the fall. He feels like he has finally woken up from a long and haunting dream.

He scans the ocean one last time. No blow. No flukes. No whales. Never again. He walks home in a trance, vacantly staring off into a distance he will never bridge. He is the last whaler of Ingfell. Nobody will take over for him as he has done for his father. Nobody will inherit his workshop, his knowledge, his will. At home his gaze finds the place where the family crest used to hang on the wall, the shape of the carved whalebone starkly outlined against the otherwise bleached wallpaper.

The retired whaler sits down, a growth of despondency taking over his heart like barnacles encrusting the bow of his ship. His eyes that used to be trained on the horizon stare dully towards the empty wall that used to hold his family crest.

And resentment grows.





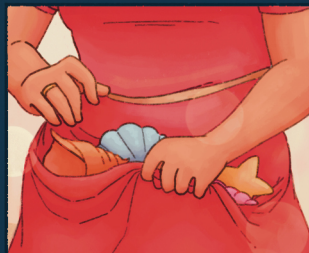
It comes in waves.



She loved wandering the shores,



Collecting seashells galore.



A smile like a breath of fresh air on the open sea.





The world is my oyster, but mine was stolen from me.



It took

it all

when it

struck,

It took my heart from me.

It comes in waves.



Truths Unchanged

Astrid

Stepping onto the pontoon offers some kind of reprieve, but not much. The swaying of the boat on such choppy waters had sent his stomach churning, and no matter how much he thought he'd grow accustomed to the ocean's movements, the captain of the boat he'd paid to catch a ride on had deemed him (with a bout of amused laughter) a lost cause.

Today, the Journalist has been tasked with visiting and observing a strange place called the Gale Cliffs. He'd prepared a few questions ahead of time, his plans and ideas scribbled down into a notebook with its edges crinkled from the seawater ruining them on the trip over, but he knew them all by heart regardless.

Apparently, there were strange rumors about this place. While he didn't necessarily believe in them, any good writer knows that these whispers and strange happenings must have *some* basis or explanation. If he were to be the one to find out what is exactly happening here, his name could become well-known in the field.

The chance of fame is enough for the Journalist to wipe his clammy hands on his trousers, take in a deep breath of salty air, and wave off the captain as he steps further onto the pontoon. The sounds of his steps are dampened with how wet the wood is underneath his feet, and truly, the irony of wanting solid ground when he's just stepping from one small boat to one bigger one isn't lost on him.

A large looming arch of rock looms in the short distance from the town that resides on these cliffs. He's headed to the town next, but

for now, this arc's staggering height almost feels like a bad omen. It makes him feel excruciatingly small.

"You need some repairs? Or maybe to sell?"

Quickly, he turns to the sound of the voice. There's something surprisingly soft about the tone, despite the fact the woman approaching him is covered in what he can only guess as fish parts and pieces. Her striped apron is stained with all sorts of things.

"I had heard about a Travelling Merchant who might have some information for me," the Journalist says, nodding slightly as she greets him with a small smile. "I'm a journalist looking into the Gale Cliffs here. I've heard... some strange things have been happening."

Immediately, her eyes widen. It's not a fearful reaction, but clearly one of surprise.

"Ah, you're not from around here" she hums thoughtfully, wiping her hands with a stray rag she pulls out from somewhere. When she extends that same hand, the Journalist quickly shakes it, happy to talk to one of the locals. "What have you heard so far?"

He opens his notebook, flipping to a few particular pages.

"Something about a few fishermen going missing recently. Many of the townsfolk claim there's a monster in the water, but there are varying details."

She tilts her head in interest. It's obvious that the Merchant has information—his sources *are* reliable after all. They wouldn't have told him to speak with her if she wasn't trustworthy. It just seems like she's trying to decide just *how much* to say.

"A few have gone missing, yes." She tugs a bit at the yellow beanie

on her head. The movement seems nervous. "Are you headed to the town as well?"

"I will be," he confirms with a nod. "Why? Anything I should know before I do?"

She quickly looks past him and even past the boat he'd arrived on that's still waiting for him. In fact, she looks upward, contemplative.

"Night is going to come soon," she says, her voice a clear warning of sorts. "It comes out whenever it wants, night or day. But the sun is already beginning to set, and it only gets harder to see in the dark."

The Journalist has enough experience to know not to openly scoff in front of those he's asking information from. However, it feels a bit comical to him, even if the area does have a particular atmosphere to it. She seems almost forlorn for a moment, like she really *is* thinking about a large creature out there. It's something almost cheesy, but there's nothing joking in her expression.

"So you've seen something?" He asks instead. "I'm a good listener, you know."

The Merchant doesn't seem amused by this, but she still doesn't seem unkind in the slightest. He wonders if he had been here for repairs instead, she would have been more chatty.

"It's a bit difficult to explain to someone who isn't familiar with the area as a whole." She finally meets his gaze properly with a smile still curled on her face, although it's a bit tense. "The residents of Ingfell have been terrorized by this creature. It eats at the rock."

The Journalist suddenly quirks an eyebrow. "The rock?"

She points towards the cliffs, bringing his gaze to where she's gesturing. It takes his eyes a moment to adjust through the slight fog lingering in the air, but the massive rocky structure that houses Ingfell and supports that large arch is impossible to miss, regardless of the weather. Out here on the ocean, it had been the only land for several dozen kilometers, and its incredible mass had not been a disappointment from the very first moment the Journalist laid eyes on it.

"The Ruins," the Merchant explains, as if that was all the explanation in the world. When she sees the patient expression he wears, finally understanding that he's still waiting for more information, she smiles once again. It's wrapped up in nothing other than pure politeness. "The monster is eating through all of the rock—the *cliffs*. The town is sure to fall into the ocean if it continues."

Now *this*, the Journalist finds to be entirely dramatic. As someone who has years of proper experience, he knows not to let his own judgement cloud the facts, but something of this caliber just feels like a terrible horror novel. (Maybe one of his old friends had written when they were all still in college at that.) The idea of a big, terrible, scary monster sending the town nearby into ruin feels more fiction than fact, but the Journalist truly hopes his disbelief isn't showing.

The hesitant look on the Merchant's face tells him that it likely is, even if just a little.

He writes down everything she'd just told him, his pen scratching hurried lines into his notebook as he hums, nodding as if he'd believed her the entire time.

"Missing boats... parts of the cliffs being eaten away... the residents are terrorized... Thank you for the information." He folds

the cover of his notebook back to the front, resolutely finishing up here with the Merchant.

She had provided a good starting point for him, even if it likely will just serve as an example of how these urban legends have the ability to instill fear into the locals in his work. He can already imagine some of the sentences that will appear in his article. *A mysterious sighting spreads fear like wildfire. Nearby residents have become entirely consumed by the strange happenings here, evoking terror and rumors from everyone around. While there is no definitive evidence, locals truly believe—*

“Don’t forget to talk to the locals,” the Merchant reminds the Journalist before waving him off with a bit of dried blood still coating her hands from earlier. He adds a mental note to include it in his description of her for later; he respects the hard labor after all. “There are a few people who might have more information for you when you arrive there!”

The Journalist, genuinely grateful, thanks her one final time before boarding the boat once again. He hadn’t been off it for long, yet he already dreads the remaining journey towards the cliffs.

The captain thankfully isn’t the chatty type, leaving the Journalist to scribble some more in his notebook, thinking of a few more questions to ask. *How often do disappearances happen? What has the town done to fight against this supposed creature? Do they have proof that the cliffs are being eaten as the Merchant had suggested, instead of just naturally eroding because of the ocean waters surrounding it?* He’ll, of course, ask them in a more unbiased manner, but for now, these are good starting points for his future interviews.

The Journalist is hardworking, this fact something even he can’t refute. He’s been slowly making his way up the ranks over the last few years, starting off at the bottom of the ladder and climbing his

way up rung by rung. This story is his biggest yet. Even if it's about the urban legends being false (something he already expects to happen), the amount of travel and effort it has taken for him to explore these rumors for himself is a huge step in his career. Back in the city, a story about this place so far away, is bound to gain traction.

It *has* to.

Tapping his pen against his chin, the Journalist takes in a deep breath, the sea salt so strong that it fills his nostrils in a way that practically burns.

Soon enough, the rocky cliffs are close enough that the captain calls out to him to let him know they're close.

"I think I missed the dock on the right," the captain calls over the waves against the hull. "It'll take a little longer, but we'll travel through the cliffs so I can circle around to the other side."

The Journalist calls back out in agreement, settling against the deck railing, watching as the stone begins to narrow.

Being in between these cliffs is almost a surreal experience. As they pass under the huge archway, he finds himself in awe all over again. Nothing could have prepared him for the sheer size of this place up close, and as the boat slows to traverse through some of the passageways, they tower over everything so much that he almost starts to feel claustrophobic. It's beautiful and jarring at the same time, the Journalist having to crane his neck to try to even see the tops of the cliffs.

The captain, experienced with his boat, travels through the narrow channels with ease, even though he'd told the Journalist earlier how he'd never been here before. It calms down some of the fear he has, albeit only slightly. The cliffs just really are *that* massive.

After just a few more minutes of watching the scenery, something catches his eye.

Admittedly, all the traveling out here had meant the Journalist was low on sleep in general, so he can't help but rub at his eyes when he feels like there's something glowing a deep red deep below the surface. Red usually isn't easy to see in the water, and on top of that, he can't think of a single thing that would even be red in the first place under there.

He glances at the captain who seems too preoccupied with navigation to have noticed it too.

This could easily be explained by exhaustion, the Journalist argues, wiping at his eyes once more.

But the red doesn't fade away. It lingers, bobbing underneath the waves, a soft glow that feels... unnatural.

Suddenly, that glow shifts. It doesn't disappear with the distance the boat should be putting in between them, but it moves at the same pace. Following. Almost stalking.

The Journalist sighs, closing his eyes and taking in another deep breath. The Merchant's tales must have put these silly thoughts in his tired mind. Maybe when he peers back into the depths, he'll be met with an explanation to all of this. Maybe this red orb *thing* can be dredged up and checked out, and the town can rest easy once more when they learn what it is that has caused all of these nonsensical rumors.

When he opens his eyes, he exhales the breath he'd been holding.

Instead of an explanation, the orb is now so close that it practically breaks the water's surface.

A scream is trapped in his throat, catching him on that exhale.

It really *is* a monster of pure horror.

A singular red eye fixates on him underneath all the blue, its jagged teeth so crooked and sharp that they resemble the crumbling cliffs surrounding them. It's *huge*, something far bigger and longer than he could have ever possibly imagined. It feels like time stills in this moment, letting him process what he's looking at, before it jumps, reality crashing into him so hard that he drops to the wooden deck.

"*Monster!*" The Journalist screams, just in time for the creature to fall out of his line of sight as he hits the ground.

The boat immediately jerks, sending him sliding against the wet ground, his notebook flinging to the other end. It flips open, pages bending and folding with the impact as his nails dig into the deck boards for some kind of stability.

The captain's yells can be heard, clearly just as surprised and scared as the Journalist had been. But the boat is now rocking, tilting so violently that the Journalist can't even try to find his footing at all.

A few more movements from the boat and he hits his head on the side of the wall, his elbows scraped from being dragged across the wooden floor. He can't make sense of anything anymore. Everything is too loud, moving too fast, too suddenly. He can't even process what he's looking at before he's tossed overboard, the noise muffling into something almost deafeningly silent.

It's dark and cold, and he's unable to see anything even with his eyes open. The salt burns and he's sure he's bleeding from his head too. But there's something so... peaceful here.

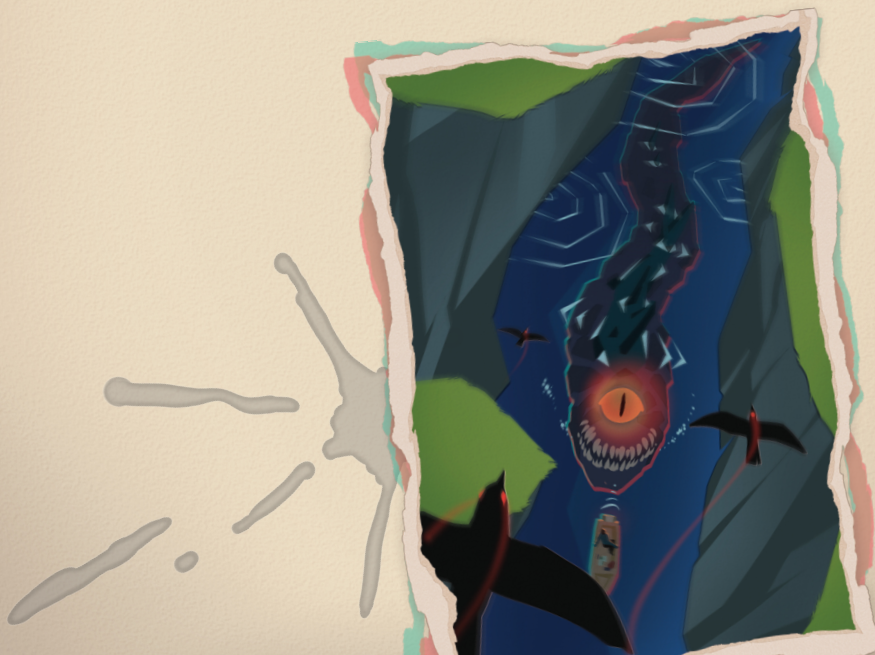
In the pitch black, it's quiet and calm. The water is still moving him about, but he can't hear or see anything anymore, and that is an eerie kind of feeling. He can't breathe either, his lungs tight as he tries to collect himself and make sense of the situation. He suddenly wonders where his notebook is, words of this creature scribbled into its pages, surrounded by doubts and skepticism.

It feels like he's being watched, although he can't exactly see who or what is lurking. It has to be the creature, but there's no sign of it when he tries to peer through the murky waters. Suddenly, a piece of wood, presumably from the destroyed boat, hits his ribs and spins him around so forcefully that he does a 180-turn.

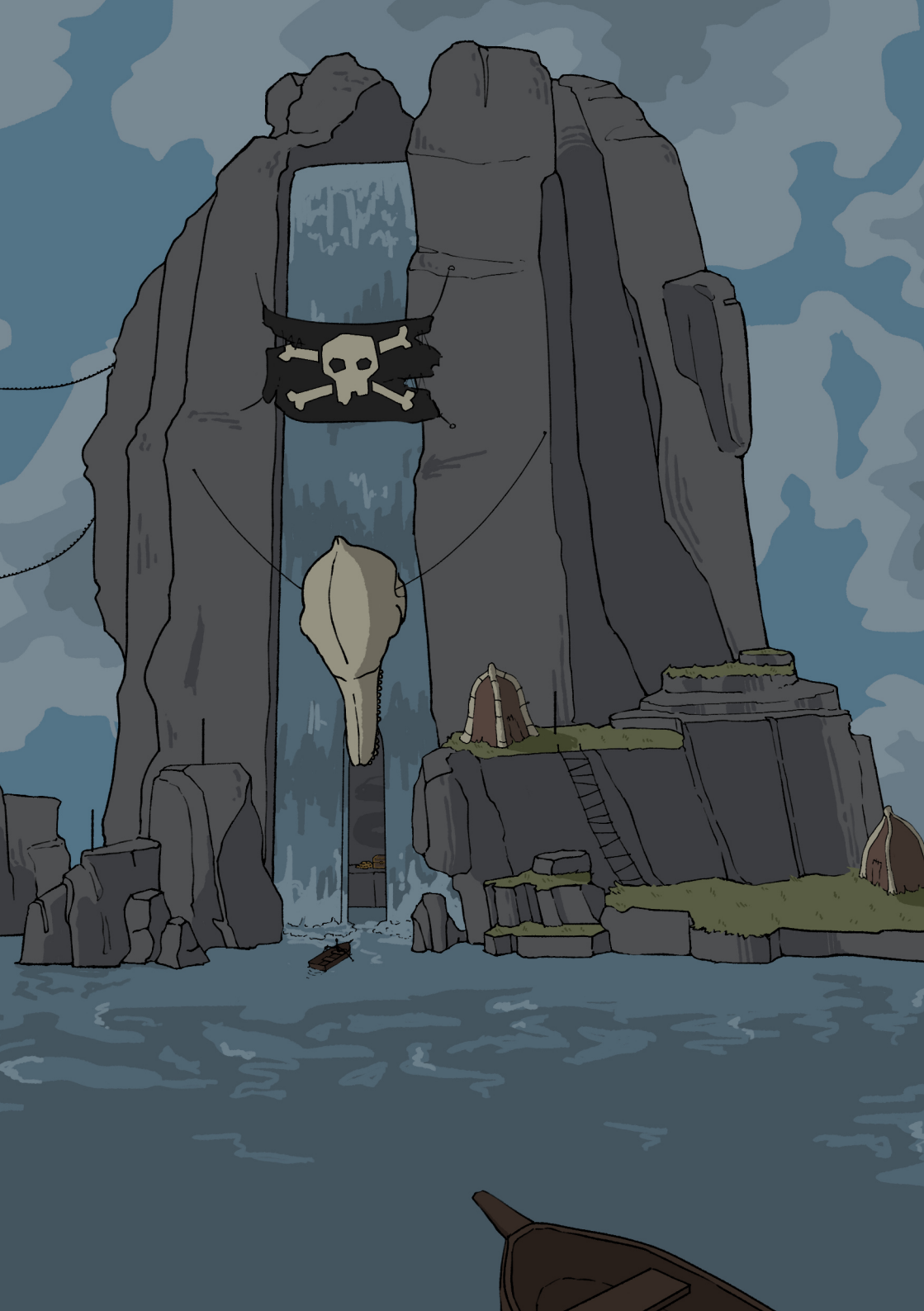
Then he sees it.

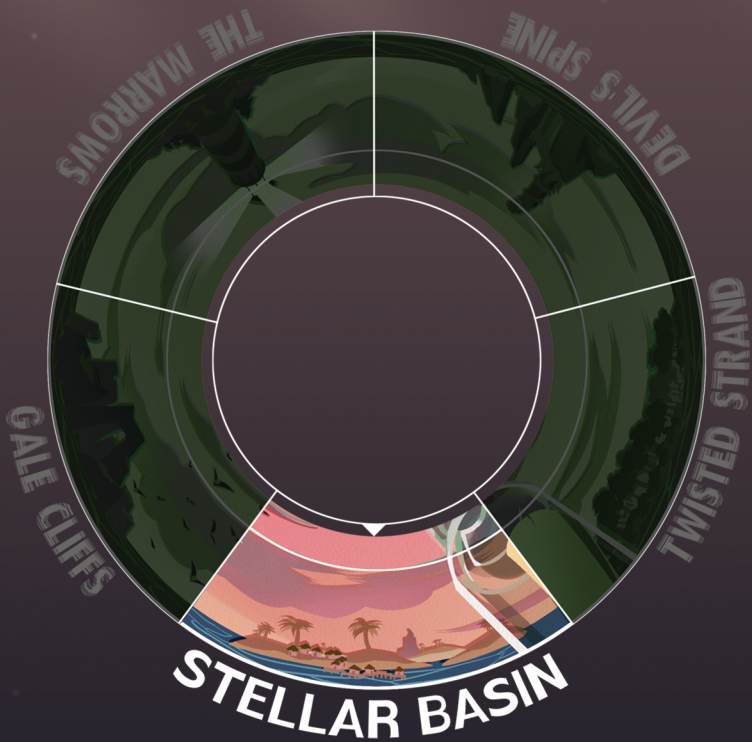
That red eye is staring back at him, fixated. The unnatural glow from it illuminates some of those jagged teeth even in the darkness. He'd truly been so embarrassingly naive.

The Journalist finds himself thinking *maybe I should have listened* before the monster lurches and everything turns black once again.









A Dog's Life

Hope

There is a beach in Stellar Basin.

Perhaps once it was more than just a beach, but whatever it once was—whatever *else* it once was—it certainly isn't that any longer. Nor has it been anything but a beach in Stellar Basin for a long time.

On that beach, there lives a Dog. He didn't always live on this particular beach, nor did he use to live alone. But it is the beach, the shallows, and finding food within those shallows that make up the life of the Dog now, and have for a long time.

The Dog could not say how long it has been, because—among other things—he is a dog, and does not have the equipment generally required for understandable speech, such as human vocal cords. With that said, even if he *was* capable of human speech, he still could not say how long it had been, for the Dog does not know. Not for certain.

He suspects, all the same. Though no longer a puppy, the Dog was still young when he arrived here, and still young when his humans left him behind. But he has grown older and wearier since those days. He isn't as fast or as impulsive as he once was, as he used to be when he raced around for fun, and to accompany his humans.

Now, it's a matter of survival. Of life and death.

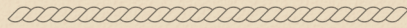
Since his humans left, the Dog likes to think he has also grown *smarter*. In the early days, scavenging for food was easy only when he came across what other humans had left behind. He knows now that there are plenty of fish in the sea. That when the tides are low, sometimes they are left on the shore, and he doesn't even have to go swimming.

The Dog has to be careful, though, about what washes up on the shore. About what he bites down on when paddling after fish in the shallows. Most of the time—nearly all of the time—it turns out fine.

But he knows, as soon as he bites down on *this* one, that this won't be fine. Not at all. The fish *crunches* in a way that normal fish never crunch. Blood leaks into his mouth, pooling between his teeth. He doesn't know if it's his blood or if it belongs to the fish. It feels wrong.



He spits the fish out as quickly as he can, gagging, and his sides heaving. He's not sure if the horrible fish swims off under its own power or not, or how hard he'd bitten down. But it's too late. It's *much* too late. The fish felt wrong, and the Dog feels wrong, and it's all he can do to drag himself out of the water and onto the beach before the wrongness takes him for everything he is and was.



They were happy, once, the three of them. The Boy and the Girl and the Dog. The Boy and the Girl came first, and they were everything to each other, though they hadn't known each other for very long before the Girl brought the Dog home.

The Girl and the Boy loved him, too. Of that, the Dog was never in any doubt. But they were both so *busy*. If the Girl had a day off, the Boy was gone from early in the morning to late at night, only returning home in time to crawl into bed beside her with the Dog curled up at their feet. And if the Boy was free to read his thick textbooks and sit on the couch with the Dog sprawled all over his lap, the Girl was busy studying... the Dog never *did* find out what, exactly, 'fish husbandry' even meant, except that the Girl was frequently off doing it.

Both of his humans were often away from their home in the city. But they both made an effort for at least one of them to be home with him whenever possible, and the Dog appreciated that once he was big enough to know and understand that they were trying their best.

So the Dog tried his best, too.

"Say," the Girl said one fateful day, when the weather was growing warmer, "have you ever heard of Stellar Basin?"

The Boy set down the essay he was writing, and he raised an eyebrow even as he reached down to scritch the Dog between his ears, and he said, "Why do you ask?"

The Dog's tail wagged, thumping against the carpet, as he looked between them.

"I'm turning twenty-one over the summer," she replied, "and we both could *really* use a break from... everything, really. Mom offered to pay for me to go on holiday to the resort there—the oceanic ecosystem in that region is *fascinating* on so many levels, which is the main reason I started to seriously consider it—and when I said that I didn't want to go without you and it would be *difficult* to find a pet sitter on short notice, she pointed out that they were willing to accommodate for small pets and offered to pay for you to go, too."

"Really?" The Boy's other eyebrow raised to join the first, high up on his face. "That's near Greater Marrow, isn't it?"

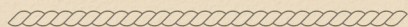
The Girl nodded. "That came up in your class on unexplained phenomena, didn't it?"

"Yeah! It did!" The Boy stood from his chair, grinning at her in the way he always did when he was excited. "Oh, the professor would be *so* jealous if he knew we'd gotten to visit..."

"So are you interested?" asked the Girl.

"Definitely," said the Boy, before crossing the room and kissing her. The Dog had never quite understood the appeal of that, but given the frequency of the Boy and the Girl engaging in that ritual, they clearly understood it much better than he did. Much like they understood whatever a holiday was.

But his people were happy about this, and so he would be happy about it too.



The holiday was fine. The Dog's humans enjoyed it much more than he did, but it was more for them than for him anyway, and it was nice to spend more time with them than he had for nearly as long as he could remember. Even if it wasn't in the cozy flat they shared in the city, far from the ocean.

He'd never seen the ocean before, despite it being what the Girl loved more than anything save the Boy. Or, perhaps, more even than him.

"Can you keep a secret, little buddy?" asked the Boy, one sunny day at the resort. They'd all gone swimming before, and the Girl was busy showering. This made relatively little sense to the Dog. If she wanted to get wet again, why not simply return to the ocean? But many things about the lives of his humans made little sense to the Dog, and he loved them all the same.

The Dog woofed. The Boy laughed.

"I know you can," he said, before reaching into his bag and pulling out a tiny box. "Take a look at this."

He opened the box. Inside was a circle of gold, with a deep blue stone set into the strange circle in a way that made it sparkle in the sun. The Boy removed the circle from the box, slipping it onto one of his fingers for the Dog to see.

"She loves sapphires," said the Boy. "She's always said they remind her of the ocean, and her eyes remind me of both... so I thought she might like one on her ring. Assuming she accepts. I'm nervous, but... I think she'll accept. I *hope* she'll accept."

He grinned at the Dog again, then replaced the golden circle—the ring, he'd called it—into the box. He replaced the box within his

bag, just before the Girl returned from her shower. And the Dog knew, then, that the ring was meant for the Girl.

"Can you keep a secret, little buddy?" asked the Girl, later that same night. The Boy was already asleep, and he'd always been a heavy sleeper. The Dog, on the other paw, was not, and so the Dog padded after the Girl and stared forlornly at her until she sighed and clipped the lead to his collar, and they both headed out into the night.

The Dog woofed, but only once he was sure they were far enough away from the resort that he wouldn't risk waking the Boy. The Girl smiled and shifted the camera she was carrying to her other arm so that she could kneel briefly and pet him better.

"See, he's *most* interested in the legends from the Marrows," the Girl explained. "But there are unexplained phenomena here, too—I've heard about them from the other guests! There's a creature living in the center of the basin. It's massive, it's even *bioluminescent*—"

The Dog did not understand half of the words coming out of her mouth, but this was clearly exciting for her, so his tail began wagging again anyway as she gave him one final pat and continued walking out toward the pier.

"—and I *know* we aren't supposed to go near the water after dark, but we won't be out for long. I just want to get a picture of it, that's all." She grinned at him, something she only ever did when she was nervous about something. "And I don't have to worry. I've got you here to protect me, after all!"

The Dog woofed again in agreement, trotting along after her. Pawprints and footprints left in sand gave way to the wood of the

pier, which extended out quite far towards the center of Stellar Basin. And beyond it, beneath the surface of the ocean... something was *glowing*.

"Do you see it, too?" breathed the Girl, setting down his leash to hold the camera with both hands. "It's *beautiful*..."

The Girl took another step forward without him, and then another, frowning at the camera she was holding. She was so close to the edge of the pier. Instinctively, the Dog growled, a low noise in his throat. But he didn't know why.

"It'll be okay," said the Girl, turning back toward him with a faint smile. "I'll just be a moment..."

But the glow from the Basin changed, and she wasn't.



The pier was gone. So was the Girl. And there was nothing that the Dog could do about it. Nothing that the Dog could do about the utterly wrong *thing* in Stellar Basin, except scramble desperately out of the water and watch as it came for the rest of the resort next.

"Oh my God!" That was the Boy, skidding to a stop in the sand beside him, grasping at his leash and holding it tightly. "Where's... oh, no. *No!*"

The Dog couldn't tell him what happened to the Girl. The Dog wouldn't tell him what happened to the Girl if he could, for some horrors are not meant to be spoken of.

Yet the Boy seemed to know, all the same. He wrapped his arms around the Dog to the sound of screams, of crashing, of things vanishing into the deep to never be seen again.

"We never should have come here," the Boy said through sobs. And then he looked up, his eyes widening in horror.

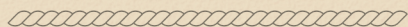
The Dog did, too. He saw the glow, changed as it had been before the Girl was gone. He saw a great and terrible thing rising out from the water, looming above them both, poised to strike.

Suddenly, the collar around the Dog's neck came unfastened. He looked to see the Boy holding it, grinning in a way that he'd never seen before.

"It's coming for us," the Boy said. "But maybe you can... go. Please. Save yourself."

The Dog should have stayed. The Dog knew, even then, that he would regret it for the rest of his days and the rest of his nights if he didn't. But, after lunging forward and licking the Boy's face, the Dog left.

The glow faded back to its original hue behind him. The Dog didn't stop running, even then.



Clarity returns to the Dog, at last, when he retches up blood. It could be from the fish that felt wrong. Or it could be from the memory of humans. His humans.

(It could be his own blood, too. The Dog wouldn't know.)

The Dog stands, shakes out his fur—it's dry already—and trots back up onto the beach, further away from the ocean. It's nighttime now, and he can see the monster's glow—unchanged—from here. He can see it from anywhere on this island, but some places feel further away from it than others, and it is those places he favors when he's forced to remember the night he'd rather forget.

That night, the resort had been destroyed. There had been a few survivors, but none of them were his people. The Dog wouldn't let them take him. He couldn't leave too.

Tonight, he returns to the destroyed ruins of the hut that the Girl and the Boy had stayed in, until they couldn't stay anywhere at all. There isn't much left of it anymore. Decaying scraps of paper in the desk the Girl used while she was staying here, long-forgotten books stashed under the bed where the Boy left them. A small box, buried in what once was the closet, that couldn't be the one the Boy kept the ring for the Girl in. Yet it looks identical.

It takes the Dog most of the night to pry the box open. The ring could have fit in it—but the box, now, is entirely empty. The Dog stares at it for a long moment, tail between his legs. Then he buries the box where he found it and curls up in the middle of it all, staring up at the stars until he's too exhausted to keep his eyes open any longer.

When morning comes, he returns to scavenging in the shallows for food, once again, as he always has since they left. He's more careful this time. He always is, until he has no choice. Until the cycle begins all over again.

...The Dog is still tired, of course. But not tired enough to leave.

Not yet.





Finding New Mooring

Sleepy

Breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out.

The Researcher scrambles around the Research Outpost, scooping up papers as she rushes out to her boat. The building lurches as *something* hits the wall of the lab, cracking wood and cabinets falling over. A monitor crashes behind the Researcher as she flees to her boat, the vessel rocking back and forth in the roiling waves. No time to save her work.

Her feet slip as she scrambles for purchase on the deck of the ship, catching herself on a small crate she had tied to the center of the boat; her rescued papers drop onto the deck and the Researcher goes to work on departing. The sharp, unnatural waves jostle her, threatening to throw her outwards to the calm midnight sea beyond the outpost. Out of the corner of her eye, the Researcher spots a tentacle swinging towards where the generator is—was.

Undo the knot, run to the steering wheel, start the engine, *go*.

The ship darts away, leaving behind the Research Outpost and the writhing mass attacking. There's a screech from an antenna tearing from the roof of her lab behind her. And for just a moment, a tentacle swings out towards the ship, its reach just short of the small boat, before returning to go after one of the machines that *was* recording currents in the Stellar Basin.

The sounds of snapping, splintering wood and falling equipment carry along to the Researcher, though muffled by the sounds of roaring engines, creaking metal beneath her and heart pounding in

her ears. Her little boat rolls with the waves; a loud smack against the water cracks the night air, hitting the Researcher as she tightens her grip and papers scatter across the deck and into the high, roiling waves. Blood pulses beneath her skin into taut fingers, threatening to release the iron grip on the wheel as the strongest of the waves lashes against the vessel's sides before dying off.

All of my work, my research...

The Researcher breathes and steadies herself as the boat moves away to the edge of the basin, the glow of the life within faint. She risks a glance back towards the Research Outpost: the most she can make out is the entity and its flailing, the lights having gone out. She suppresses a shudder and presses on a bit farther, waiting for less thrashing, less cracking and groaning, before shutting off the engines. The slight rocking of the Researcher's boat disrupts the otherwise still ocean as she lights a lamp and sets it onto the crate.

She digs out and unfolds the map of the Stellar Basin with trembling hands, smoothing out the deep creases and racking her racing brain for where she could be and where she could go. It would take too much time to get to the abandoned village, and the Traveling Merchant's pontoon... her route would go back by the Research Outpost. Whatever it was that was attacking could still be there. There is one last location labeled on the map: the Old Fortress. She hasn't been there in all her time in the Stellar Basin, despite being able to see its form from the outpost.

The Researcher glances out to the still, dark sea. Just beyond the edge of the warm light, something dark and long moves beneath the surface. *Was that a tentacle?*

She shakes her head and takes the oil lamp with her to the wheel.

The boat starts its way to the Old Fortress, the lamp the only thing standing between the Researcher and the stygian depths. The hours

trudge on by at a glacial pace, the darkness clinging to the light's edge as the Researcher makes her way around the outside of the Stellar Basin. As the boat swings around the edge of the basin, a sudden wave rushes towards the boat; the engine is immediately switched off and she dives for cover, hiding between the damp crate and the cool hull for the source of the wave to move on.

One, two, three moments pass before she sits back up and looks out at the ocean beyond. Nothing is out there in the ripples of the late night sea. She stands back up with a wobble, a jelly sensation having seized her legs. She trembles as she rights herself. The engine starts back up without a fuss, and she continues on.

As the sun finally rises behind her, the morning light helps the Researcher make out a dock near the base of the Old Fortress. Dawn breaks at last and she looks up at the looming shape of the Old Fortress, worn from storms and surrounding sea. Rougher waves lap up against the weathered rocks, reflecting the sunrise in bright oranges and spraying sea water into the cool air. She turns the engine off as she nears the fortress' dock, tying the boat to one of the poles. The Researcher stills her trembling hands before reaching to the crate and opening it to see what was inside that could be usable: a few wrapped up test tubes, a stirring rod, a pair of binoculars, a few measuring tools, and some dried food that had been packed after her last correspondence with the Northern Biological Research Society finally yielded parts for repairing some of the monitoring equipment that was starting to fail.

Equipment that was still at the torn up Research Outpost, surely either soaked or broken.

The Researcher closes the crate and brings it and the papers she rescued onto the dock. They weigh nothing compared to those cabinets filled with written down readings back at the outpost. She scans the end of the pier. There are a few storage buildings, tiny in comparison to the Old Fortress, with one shuttered, closed and secured against the weather.

I wonder if there is something useful there. Doubt there'll be any chemicals I can test the water with, though.

She stretches and looks at the Old Fortress towering above her, stark against the early morning sky. A breeze ruffles her hair and blows a few stray pages from the top of the crate towards the fortress' entrance.

Nowhere else to go but in.

She shoves her hands into her lab coat pockets, feeling the worn leather of her notebook and pencil nubs. Making her way along the base of the building, the walls loom above her as she heads past a forgotten turret and towards the doors; she picks up the papers and puts them in her pocket, sand coating her fingers. Lingering adrenaline from the previous night's escape gives her the strength to

force open the doors. The corroded hinges shriek as they give way.

The early morning light from the great doorway is the only illumination on the first floor of the Old Fortress. A thick layer of dust has settled on anything left in here: some rope cast aside in a coiled heap, a chair and small table tucked in the back, and a broken lamp near stairs that go down into the hill the Old Fortress



is on; salt mingles with the musty warmer air and darkness swallows the doorways that lead to the towers of this stone stronghold.

A second set of stairs lead upward to the higher parts of the fortress. The Researcher makes her way deeper into the building, hand against the damp stone wall to steady herself as she climbs. Light shines through the cutouts up on the higher floor with motes of dust dancing between them.

The second floor in the central part of the building is one large room with a longer table and a crate, pried open and empty, against the western wall. The wind has picked up a bit outside now, sharp as it blows through the gaps far above the Researcher's head. Stairs lead up further to the roof outside, unobtrusive.

There would be more than enough room to store her things, though that isn't saying much now. She could have more space for new equipment just on this floor and be better protected than in the Research Outpost; depending on the state of the rest of the Old Fortress, there would be so much room to build a lab-

Her thoughts come to a halt.

She's assuming that she will stay.

All of my equipment is broken or in the ocean by now. Most of the work I did is still back at the Research Outpost.

I have nothing to show them that I should be able to continue my work here.

The Researcher glances up to the ceiling and the strips of early morning light. There's no reason the Northern Biological Research Society would let her stay after such destruction; she barely has basic materials to her name, much less the few expensive pieces she

had and had only just fixed. They may even use it as a reason against sending her out to the field again, especially if she described the creature that attacked the Research Outpost. She starts walking up the stairs once more, this time all the way to the rooftop.

The view from the rooftop stretches onward across the Stellar Basin and beyond, lit up by the rising sun. All is calm after the turbulent night.

...what could have created something like whatever it was that attacked the Research Outpost?

The Researcher stares in the direction of the ruined Research Outpost, the graveyard of her old work. None of the known species in the Stellar Basin are able to grow to that size. There could have been a change in the environment, or something could have been introduced from beyond the Stellar Basin. If she left, she would never find out why.

She would never make a name for herself.

Someone else would be sent in to do the work and take the credit while she was far, far away from the Stellar Basin and a potential discovery, one that could've been *hers*. She would be left to sink with her old work into the depths.

The Researcher runs down the stairs, back to the boat. She has so much work to do: unpacking, organizing, planning. It may have been a horrible setback, but this was a new chance to prove herself, a clean slate.

The sun rises into the sky on a new day, and the Researcher begins a new project.





First Contact

Choco

A packet of papers lies upon the desk of the Editor for the *Annals of Anthropological Discoveries*. The crisp folds of the brown sheet enveloping the packet belie the contents within—papers with crumbling edges yellowed with sun and time and marked with hardened ripples from water long since evaporated. In some places, the ink has smudged, running in dark trails like seaweed. A long string of jute twine tying the package closed remains the only thing that keeps the delicate contents from falling apart.

A square of note paper is wedged beneath the string. In handwriting with sharp, meticulous strokes, it reads:

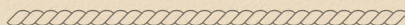
Salvaged from the site of the lost expedition of 1932

Includes fragments of various writings:

- *Unpublished manuscript*
- *Draft for "Letters From the Field" journal section*
- *Field journal entries*

Some contents are unsettling but may provide valuable insights

Please review and consider for publication



...some of the artifacts in our possession include a tribal mask, a wooden spear, and a bangle carved from conch shell. At first glance, these items do not seem to share any commonalities that would suggest they originated from the same culture.

However, a curious pattern on the bangle may present an answer: a cluster of small circles with a set of lines protruding from one end. This pattern seems to be replicated on the handle of the spear in a stylized fashion. Roughly circular shapes are carved into the spear shaft at several intervals. Extending from these circular shapes are lines that twist around the shaft toward the spear tip like fingers growing and elongating toward their prey. The mask has presented a conundrum for some time, but the circle-and-line motif is represented in unusually large eyeholes and slashes cut into the lower lip of the mouth (Figure 2).

The age of these artifacts is unclear. However, we estimate that they are at least one to two decades old, and possibly even older, judging by the weathering of the wood of the mask and spear. The spear was discovered in 1928, among the detritus of a shipwreck that had washed up on a small island near the town of Greater Marrow. Two years later, the mask



Figure 2. A tribal mask.

was recovered shortly after the ship carrying the item mysteriously sank in the bay of a whaling region known as the Gale Cliffs; where the mask originated is unknown. The bangle was purchased in an estate sale in the village of Little Marrow and was subsequently housed in the Ironhaven Museum for the past fifteen years. How the previous owner came to possess the bangle is unclear.

The manner in which these items were discovered has stirred the imagination and birthed rumors about their significance; the bangle in particular is famously said to haunt its owner with spirits seeking a body to inhabit [the rest of line is smudged]



Manuscript page 5

...and based on this evidence, we suspect these artifacts originated in a region known as the Twisted Strand. This region lies in the remote waters northwest of the Marrows and is home to a vast, unexplored mangrove forest.

[Several lines are smudged and illegible]

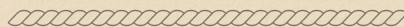
In a Letter to the Editor in last month's issue, Roberts et al. argued that such an unwelcoming environment cannot sustain even a small tribe of people. Curious individuals from passing ships or the Marrows have ventured into the Twisted Strand. Reports from these explorations describe only the outskirts of the mangroves, which consist of maze-like waterways choked off by winding roots. Few adventurers have penetrated the interior; alas, these intrepid souls were never heard from again.

Additionally, no reports exist regarding contact with the hypothetical inhabitants of the mangrove forest. Roberts et al. maintained that isolated mangrove forests barely contain the resources necessary for human survival, let alone the potential to nourish a culture capable of the craftsmanship that produced the bangle, mask, and spear.

Our esteemed colleagues also suggested that these artifacts may not belong to a single culture at all, but instead to several unrelated cultures in various places in the world. The workmanship of the mask is crude compared to that of the bangle and spear. They also questioned the unity of style we observed among these pieces: "The motif of circles and lines that supposedly connects these artifacts is a hypothesis built on reasoning more porous than a slice of swiss cheese" (Roberts 3).

We acknowledge the merits of the arguments by Roberts et al. However, humans have subsisted in environments as harsh as arctic ice fields, and items produced by a single culture can vary widely in quality, utility, and design. The resourcefulness of our species has astonished anthropologists time after time. With confidence in this resourcefulness, we will embark on an expedition to the Twisted Strand to make first contact with the tribal people who created these artifacts.

The artifacts will accompany us on our journey, as offerings of [blotchy smudges] and good fortune...



"Letters From the Field" draft page 2

...is not without complications, with the primary one being fog. So thick that it completely obscures our vision at night and hangs like a humid shroud during the day. The fine mist coats everything—the gunwale, our belongings, our skin. We have sealed the artifacts in a bag to preserve them from damage.

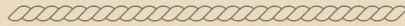
The residents of the Marrows claim the fog is a new phenomenon that descended after an accident at sea several years ago. According to local hearsay, the fog is a curse that blankets the waters from the Gale Cliffs to the Twisted Strand, causing ships to run aground and driving people mad. The legend has caused unease among the superstitious members of the crew. There must be a more mundane explanation for this strange fog, and I am certain this reassurance will calm their rattled nerves.

We have set up our camp on one of the many small islands that ring the mangrove forest of the Twisted Strand. Though the fog leaves us blind, we are not deaf. The trees groan and creak as though straining from under some unseen, mysterious weight. Nighttime is filled with the sounds of waves rushing against the shore and nocturnal denizens splashing in the mangrove waters. Some of the creatures seem to find us a curious sight, and they certainly do not attempt to conceal their presence as they trail behind our vessel! If only we could catch a glimpse of them beyond the eddies they create in the water.

Most promising, however, are the sounds that carry on the wind. Sibilant whispers, voices in another tongue.

Waters rich in wildlife, and hints that point to the presence of other humans. Naysayers may make their arguments from afar, but putting boots on the ground is the only way to discern the truth.

Tomorrow, we embark on our first foray into the mangroves. The anticipation among our team is palpable.



A collection of field journal entries

12th May 1931

10:16 AM

Today is our first trip into the mangrove forest. I was so nervous that I forgot my hat, and now water insects keep buzzing furiously past my ears.

The Anthropologist tasked each person with keeping our own log of the expedition. As the Intern, I'm not certain how useful my observations will be, but he seems to think that every perspective is needed. Perhaps my novice eye will spy something useful, though I find that unlikely. But my role is to help out, and to learn. And if I can contribute something that will prove that Roberts was wrong to doubt us, then our team will be part of history in the making!

We spent the last few hours navigating the waterways. Mangrove roots grow thick and wild, a jungle that will dash our canoes if we are not careful. Fog covers everything in a sickly shade of yellow; it fills my lungs with the stench of decay. I cannot help but wonder how an entire culture can survive, let alone thrive, in this oppressive environment. But I cannot allow such thoughts to linger, as doubt will do me no good on this journey.

It comforts me to know that our Guide is familiar with these waters. She hails from Greater Marrow, and her sense of adventure has brought her to the Twisted Strand time and time again. She has not navigated past the outer waterways before, and probably for the best. Making first contact can be fraught with uncertainty and danger, even when the contacting party is prepared.

I do wish that I was assigned to the rowboat leading the way. The Anthropologist and Guide often have their heads ducked together in conversation, and I long to hear the tales and theories that must pass between them.



12th May 1931

1:54 PM

We have lost sight of the lead boat that carries the Anthropologist and our Guide. It must have happened when we rounded a particularly massive tangle of mangrove roots. The other three boats, including mine, are accounted for.

I must not panic. We will find them. We HAVE to find them.

It is only early afternoon, but the fog has taken on an unusual gloom. Dark shapes loom and fall away as we drift on the water. Alarm seems to distort the senses, for even the tree roots appear to shift without warning.

If we cannot find them [the ink here has run, obscuring the rest of the sentence]



12th May 1931

4:48 PM

We still have not found the Anthropologist's boat. Sunset is over an hour away, but the fog has already grown thick and covers the forest in a putrid cloud.

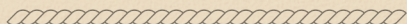
We paddled for hours but discovered no sign of the missing boat. At first, we dared not raise our voices. But soon we threw caution to the wind, shouting into the dank air without caring if we attracted the attention of the mangroves' inhabitants, whether animal or human.

Our efforts received no reply.

Through the occasional break in the trees, we can see birds flocking above the treetops. Their bodies are blots of ink against the sky, and their eyes glitter red in the sun. I cannot help thinking of them as carrion eaters circling a carcass. Their cries echo like screams.

[The next line is blurred and completely unreadable]

We must exit these waters before darkness falls, or we will have no hope of finding our way out.



12th May 1931

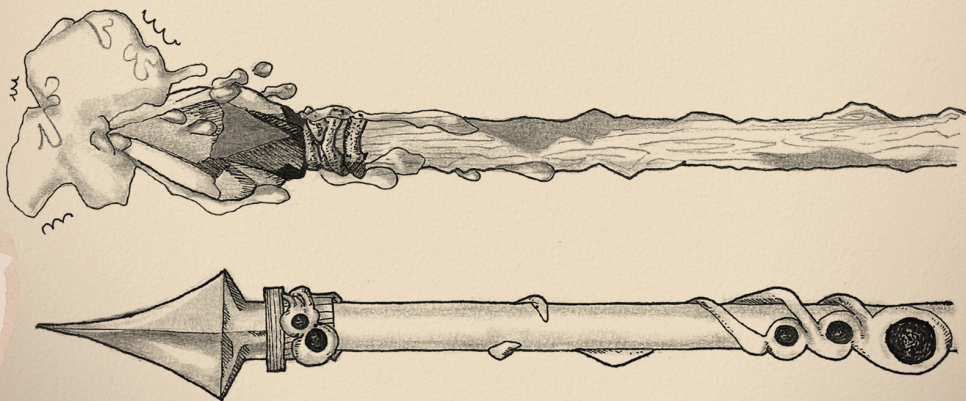
7:33 PM

We have returned to camp. Worry and nerves hang on our every move, and few of us have any appetite for dinner.

Though unease turns my stomach, it cannot smother the excitement about our new find. During our journey, the Assistant retrieved an object from the silty shallows of the mangrove forest: a spear.

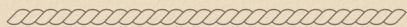
The length of the spear was caked in mud. We scrubbed off what we could, but some of the muck clings stubbornly to the shaft. The tip of the spear is embedded in a gelatinous substance that almost glows when observed at certain angles in the dimness of dusk. Are these the remains of partially decayed vegetation? But the substance appears to comprise a single, rubbery clump, as though torn from a much larger host.

When examined side by side with the tribal spear among our artifacts, the spear we retrieved today has notable differences. The workmanship is crude, and the shaft appears to be hewn from a branch with the rough strokes of a blade. The tip is but a sharp rock lashed to one end of the shaft. In contrast, the tribal spear was carved and polished by a skilled hand.



A tribal people may reside in the Twisted Strand, after all! However, I know the Anthropologist would caution us from jumping to conclusions. I can hear him now: "A single retrieved spear is not enough evidence to support this hypothesis." Furthermore, the differences between the spears are significant. I can't help but wonder if they truly were produced by different and unrelated cultures; the possibility that Roberts might be right irks me so much, it could drive me mad.

The spear found among the mangroves deserves further study, but we have more pressing matters. As per protocol, the Assistant broadcasted a distress signal via radio. The rest of the night will be spent making preparations for our search, which will resume at dawn.



13th May 1931
5:42 AM

A paddle washed ashore overnight. The torn remnant of a straw hat was also found among the rocks, snagged on a rotted log. No one says anything, but we all know it once belonged to the Guide.

Our search begins this morning. The Assistant argued that each boat should explore a different waterway, but the other members of the expedition talked him down. We shall go as one group, for there is safety in numbers.

The sun has only just dawned over the horizon. We will set out when there is more light to see by. But even through the fog that

hangs over the water, I can see shapes that lurk in the mouth of the mangrove forest. Glowing mounds that appear without warning, then disappear just as suddenly.

My hands shake as I write, from nerves and a sleepless night. The wind carries sounds like voices, faint murmurs with tantalizing half-words just outside of my hearing. Voices of an indigenous population, or [illegible]. Or is it insanity, as the unending hours I've spent awake melt into the recesses of my brain?

What manner of human or beast awaits us in the Twisted Strand? I do not know. Fear has shut our mouths from guessing. We swallow our dread with the aim of accomplishing our objective and leaving this place as quickly as possible.

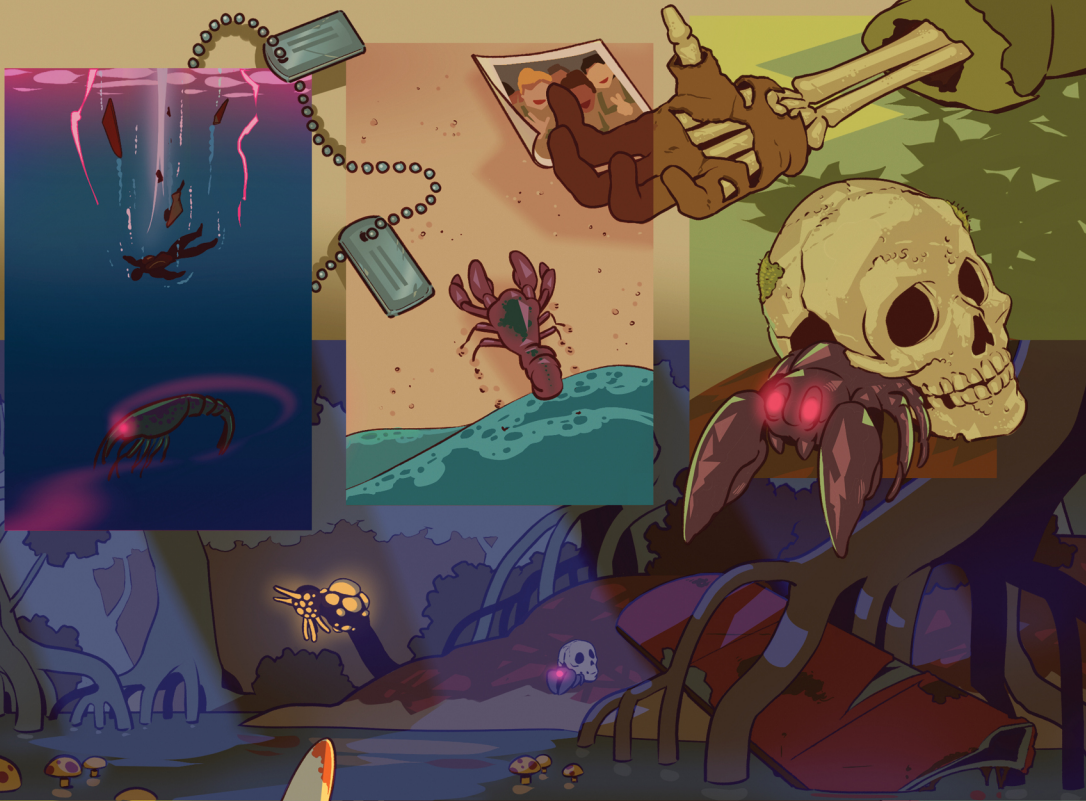
We must hold out hope, and search. There is nothing else we can do.

The sun is well above the horizon now. The carrion birds from yesterday circle the trees, not far from the entrance to the mangroves. Their red eyes are a beacon.

The birds are our best and only clue—and there, we shall commence our search.

I wish us godspeed. I will report our findings in my next entry, after we return.

[The rest of the page lies blank]



Capgras Glaze

Raen

There were a few air routes that passed by the Marrows, most of which involved traveling in a straight line. It was safer to give the turbulence created by the high mountains of the Gale Cliffs and the Devil's Spine a wide berth, but the rest of the region was flat, safe, and entirely unremarkable.

"I'm telling you! The fish glow! Y'gotta be doing this on purpose, right, Lieutenant?"

"There's no way you've seen it with the fog that rolls in at night. C'mon, Commander, back me up here!"

Unremarkable to the Airman, at least.

As his squadron crawled across the sky on a routine flight that passed directly over Little Marrow and headed off to the north-north-west, the Airman found himself subjected to the routine bickering of his squadmates. Today's in-flight entertainment? A live radio show where the youngest member of their little crew, the Private, had once again picked a silly fight with the grouchiest pilot in the skies, the Lieutenant, because he had committed the crime of saying that the cluster of mangroves they would be passing by soon was the nicest area in the region.

"I don't know why you're so eager to die on this hill," the Lieutenant grumbled, "It's just a bunch of sand around a hole in the ocean!"

"As if some lame trees without a name are any better!"

"Last week you said everyone in Ingfell called it the Twisted

Strand!”

“Doesn’t count if it’s not getting named on any maps, y’know!”

“You are *such* a—”

“The nighttime fog’s pretty recent,” the Commander cut the Lieutenant off, chiming in a couple beats behind in the conversation, “and the fish *do* glow, but can’t say I liked it when I flew over it on a night assignment way back when, a bit before the fog came. It was pretty, sure, but it creeped me out just as much.”

“M-maybe it just looks better from the ground!” the Private stammered out, the Airman picturing his pout as the Lieutenant turned on his transmitter to make sure everyone heard him laugh directly into his microphone.

Though the whole conversation was childish and he’d sooner crash his plane than throw his hat in the ring, the lively chatter over the radio as his comrades argued about things that didn’t matter made for decent company as they lazily made their way towards the distant horizon.

“Hey, uh, Commander?” The radio crackled to life and an unfamiliar voice filled the Airman’s cockpit, “Speaking of fog... it’s looking pretty strange portside...”

The Airman turned towards the debatably named cluster of trees off in the distance and saw the tan haze that perpetually hung over the tangle of mangroves visibly shift. At first glance he thought it might’ve been from a large gust of wind, but as he watched it move, it looked less and less natural and more and more...

“The hell is that?”

Exclamations from the other pilots continued to pour in, panic flooding the airwaves as the fog moved like an irritable beast awoken from its slumber. It uncoiled from the mess of trees; its eyeless gaze followed the flock of planes as they passed by from a

distance that no longer felt safe. It pulled back, like a snake preparing to strike, and then—



The Airman found himself standing on the ground beneath the trees, ears ringing, staring at the wrecked remains of his plane.

There was a dull ache in his heart as he slowly processed that his partner would never fly again. The damage was immediately apparent: the crash had snapped the tail clean off, the left wing had practically shattered, and, while he couldn't know how bad it was until he opened her up, the engine had a lot of delicate parts that wouldn't enjoy a hard impact with the ground.

She was gone. A constant part of his life had been ripped away from him, but as he tried to grieve, as he tried to understand what he was looking at, panic climbed him like vines choking a tree.

How did he crash? How did he get through the crash uninjured? What happened to everyone else? Did they crash too? How had he managed to travel from the open ocean all the way to—

splash

The sound of movement in the water behind him was quiet and easily drowned out by the sound of his brain being pulled in a dozen directions by every other thought already running through it, but some part of him was able to signal the alarm and he spun around to face it, barely able to catch a glimpse of a massive snake-like, slug-like creature as it retreated back into the shallow water. He stared at the murky water for a long moment, trying to match the little that he saw with any animal he knew of, but...

The Airman was already on high alert from the crash, but that *thing* made his hair stand on end. It was as thick as his plane's fuselage, and the bits sticking out of its body that glowed a sickly pale yellow, and the eerie noise it made... the Airman would readily admit that he didn't know a lot about animals, but, as the ringing in his ears faded, he couldn't escape the feeling that what he had seen was something else, something that, like the mist above the trees, he couldn't explain.

That sensation closed in on him, like the haze surrounding him, like the noises in the forests, growing louder, growing denser, wrapping itself around his heart and paralyzing him with an emotion that wasn't quite fear. He needed to take action, to take stock of his supplies, to look for survivors, to do something, to do *anything*, but he was rooted to the spot, unable to bring himself to look away from where it had slipped away.

He needed to run. He needed to run. He needed to run. He needed to run. He needed to run—!

"There you are, Airman!"

Snapping out of his trance, the Airman spun around again, this time finding a man headed towards him, stumbling over the naturally knotted nets formed by the jungle's cluttered carpet of vines.

"Thank goodness you're alright! Already met up with a few other survivors and we'll regroup by the massive tree in the middle by nightfall. The one y'can see from the air, y'know?"

It was the Private.

They stared at each other for a long moment.

"..."

"Are y'okay, Airman?"

It didn't seem real. Too much had happened all at once, and he still didn't even know exactly what it was that had happened aside from the vague sense that it had all come crashing down.

The Private looked past the Airman for a brief moment, at the wreck of his plane, but quickly brought his gaze back to the Airman as if he had been looking at something he shouldn't've been.

"...Are y'still a little dizzy? There's some time before sundown, so if y'need some rest before we get moving..."

The Airman held his head in his hand, his temples pinched between his middle finger and his thumb, massaging away a headache that didn't exist. He let out a hot, exhausted breath into his palm and suddenly the Private's suggestion seemed like the best idea in the world.

"Yeah, I need a moment."

But it *was* real. The heavy, hot, humid air was real. The shattered plane and shattered dreams were real. The feeling of his fingers dragging across his skin, tracing above his eyes until they joined together to pinch his brow... it was all real.

"Alright! I'll... uh... step away for a moment, then! We still haven't found the Lieutenant, but it looked like he was going down somewhere to the northeast of where y'landed, so I'll go scope out the area and see if I can find him."

The Airman slowly sat down, too tired to remain upright and too tired to watch the Private go.

"Do whatever you need to."

Whatever he had seen before the crash, whatever he had seen in the water, the ringing in his ears... that was all real too. The threat of starvation, the threat of dehydration, and the threats that lurked in the forest and lurked in the water were all real. Whatever

sense of urgency he was supposed to be feeling wasn't there, so it didn't *feel* real, but... lying down for a bit, resting for a bit, or at least stewing in those emotions and letting them sink in for a bit would fix that, right?



The Airman heard someone approach from the direction the Private had left in.

“Do y’hear that noise?”

It sounded like the Private had returned.

“What noise?”

“It’s just me, then? It’s some weird... droning screech... I think...”

The Airman definitely wasn’t hearing anything like that.

“Anyways! Y’feelin any better, Airman?”

The last part of what the Private said came out garbled, a strange mishmash of syllables and sounds that had no relationship to any language the Airman was aware of; it was like a record player that kept jumping to random sections of the track and played in three directions at once.

The strangest thing, though, was that it was deafeningly quiet, like a whisper from across the room he wasn’t supposed to hear that, despite its low volume, smothered all other noise. He couldn’t hear the nearby splashing, or the distant bird cries, or the wind in the leaves of the trees, or the ringing in his ears... all he could hear in that brief moment was some weird, incomprehensible nonsense that left as quickly as it came.

But maybe he had just misheard?

"A bit."

He wasn't feeling *much* better, and he might even be worse for wear if he had misheard the Private a moment before, but his brief not-quite-a-nap had given him just enough energy, just enough drive, just enough of a boost to be able to jump into action and get to work.

The Airman dragged himself to his feet and paused.

"The Lieutenant's plane crashed on the island a little ways off to the east, outside of the strand. I didn't see him, so I don't know if he made it or if I just missed him, but..."

The Private trailed off, clearly uneasy about the Lieutenant's odds of survival.

"I was thinking we should probably move camp over somewhere around here tomorrow anyway, so passing ships have a chance of seeing us, right? Whadda y'think, Airman?"

The weird noise returned again, but the Airman was more focused on what he was looking at.

He was looking at the Private. The Private was standing there, several paces away, in full view, and the Airman was looking at him. The being that was nearby and speaking to him that he was looking at was 'the Private'.

"...Sure," he said, distracted and unsure exactly what he was agreeing to.

But doubt crept into that assessment, into that identification, staining it like an oil slick on the ocean.

"Commander asked me to grab whatever supplies I could, but I

think we should probably leave some stuff if we're coming back. Have you checked on your cargo?"

There wasn't anything obviously wrong with him. The Private was just the right height and he was still wearing the same oil-stained, ill-fitting flight suit had on when they boarded their planes that morning. His unguarded posture was *correct*, and his disheveled hair was *correct*, and the nose, the eyes, the mouth, the jawline... all of it was *correct*. Each individual part was *correct*. At first glance, there was nothing he should be worried about.

But as he stared at the Private's face, his body caught his attention, and then his hair, and then his eyes, then back to his face as a whole, then to another part and another and another and another. Every piece was in focus, every piece was demanding his focus, demanding that he listen to them *insist* that they were *correct*, that nothing was wrong.

But why did they need to insist? Why would they feel the need to convince the Airman?

"Not yet," he said, unsure of who he was speaking to.

The man turned to the Airman's plane's corpse and began to pry away the sheet of metal that once served as a door to its cargo hold, apparently eager to reach the emergency supplies hidden inside.

The Airman just stared at him.

"Y'gonna help, Airman?" the man said, grunting as he tried to damage his plane.

The strange noise returned, and whatever urgency the Airman had been missing crashed down upon him all at once. Even while identifying and misidentifying the man, he had been taking it for granted that he was a person... that, like the Airman, he was a human.

But humans didn't make noises like that. He wasn't a doctor, or a physician, but there were... limitations to a human body. He didn't know what those were, but certainly this noise exceeded them, right?

His suspicion was grounded in reality; there was no need to question it.



The Airman stared at his... at *its* back.

This thing... it wasn't just a mere *stranger*... it was something else entirely. No matter how much this man, how much this *thing* pretending to be a man looked like his comrade, it *wasn't* him, and it definitely wasn't a human pretending to be him.

How did it know to find him here? How did it know about the Lieutenant, about where they were camping, about the supplies in his plane?

With a grunt it managed to tear off the door to the cargo hold, desecrating her even further.

Why was it pretending to be the Private? What happened to the Private? Why was it trying to lure him away from here?

The fake turned around, as if it knew the Airman was watching it pretend to go through the cargo hold.

“What’s the deal, Airman?” it said, an awkward, sinister smile on its face, “If you keep staring, y’re gonna make me blush.”

Like the mist that moved, like the snake-slug thing in the water, he didn’t know what it was. He instinctively knew that he would never understand what it was. All he knew was that it had plans for him and that he was in danger, and that was all that mattered. He could sort the details out later.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

He couldn’t let it know that he had figured it out. He couldn’t let it be the first to act, he couldn’t let it gain the upper hand.

“Let me help you with that.”

The Airman started to approach it.

“Feeling better?” it asked as it turned back to the plane.

“Yeah,” he said with a smile as he reached for the survival knife sheathed on his belt, “I’m feeling *much* safer now.”





Sensationalist's Obreption

OceanMyth

[A drenched and decayed fragment of parchment tumbles in the waves, stuck in an eddy. Spinning with the current. Caught and moving eternally without a destination.]

NATURALIST: You've chosen to start with me then, I suppose?

[The ink here has run—the name of the interviewer far too damaged to recover properly.]

TRANSCRIBER: Indeed.

NATURALIST: Well then. If I were to try and properly track the events that led us to the occasion at hand, I'd begin with what led up to the proposal. Four and a half meetings were needed before the proposal for the expedition could even be written. The Quartermaster asked the Expedition Lead several times how he'd arrived at that number, but there were vanishingly few answers to be had. Something about the Editor not considering the initial pitch meeting one for the proposal, just an approval of the initial idea—but the Leader wanted to count it somehow, and so he did. The man was stubborn like that.

TRANSCRIBER NOTE: (I'm not going to bother reiterating my thoughts on our leader, since it's material I'll need to redact heavily anyway to keep our magazine's clean rating. But rest assured, my thoughts were shared once again with our

Naturalist, at significant and expansive length.)

NATURALIST: At least you were the one to say it. You can just strike it from the record, and make sure any criticism of our glorious leader never goes to print. He'd hound you for the rest of your days.

TRANSCRIBER: Well technically speaking, I'm not supposed to editorialize in my interviews. And I'm certainly not supposed to strike any part of the written record. Practically speaking though, there's not a damn thing they can do back on the continent—all they know about how the trip went is what's in the papers I give them. Sometimes they do an interview or two to verify, but they're not fussed about a few misaligned details here and there.

NATURALIST: Is that so? You're still writing as we speak. Do you ever stop?

TRANSCRIBER: I'm simply performing my duties as they were assigned. It can be a tedious task to keep track of these conversations. If staying alert means I leave an aside here or there—it will give me something to laugh at during the long hours editing these records in the cabin at the conclusion of our voyage.

NATURALIST: I...see. Did you even want to interview me? Or maybe you'd like me to watch as you stroke your ego some more?

[The jagged edges of the parchment bottom flutter and curl, the interview left unfinished.]



[The sea swells here heave with sodden parchment. Dashed between the rocks, only a handful of the scraps are legible. They can be picked from between the Spines like gristle from among teeth.]

CAPTAIN: I thought I told you—keep me out of this mess.

TRANSCRIBER NOTE: (A brief aside from your chronicler here - there is no earthly way I know to capture the tedium of getting our good captain to sit down with me for a proper interview. I've wheedled, cajoled and carefully prodded my way into this meeting—I don't intend that it be wasted with the man's damned obfuscations.)

TRANSCRIBER: Captain, you were the one who agreed to the interview. I'm not pulling you into this mess—you agreed to take us to the Spine. And your pay most certainly covered compensation for a single interview for the sake of our readers.

CAPTAIN: Mhm. Fine then. Still not sure why I agreed to this foolish...mess

TRANSCRIBER: The *money*, Captain, the money.

TRANSCRIBER NOTE: (Ah, perhaps I pushed things too far there. That was a mighty strong glare he just leveled at me. Maybe a redirection?)

CAPTAIN: Damned my own self.

TRANSCRIBER: You've called our expedition a mess several times now—would you care to elaborate?

CAPTAIN: I find your willful blindness to the reality we've found ourselves in impressive.

TRANSCRIBER: I'm going to need a better answer than that.

CAPTAIN: You're not going to get it.



[The eerie volcanic glow shines steadily from the abyssal depths, save where detritus and dust from the ocean churns into the fathom-foam, illuminated in a brief and halting moment. Spurs of a splintered shipwreck catch the parchment, which has managed to remain intact.]

TRANSCRIBER: You are aware that this will probably be one of the longer interviews I do—and that I'll probably need at least one of these every few days, right?

EXPEDITION LEAD: Yes. As I've said already though, I'm happy to give you my personal journal entries and logs for the length of our excursion, once we've arrived back at port. The contents will probably save you almost all the effort of compiling your little...interviews.

TRANSCRIBER: It's policy. I can't draw from your observations too closely without accusations of bias—I am here as an observer, nothing more. Think of me as merely a ghost.

EXPEDITION LEAD: You eat a lot of our food for a ghost.

TRANSCRIBER: Ha.

TRANSCRIBER: Here, I have a list of interview questions for you. I'll go through them now, and it'll set a baseline for how things will go moving forward, as we repeat this interview throughout the voyage.

EXPEDITION LEAD: Go ahead.

TRANSCRIBER: Why have you organized this expedition?

EXPEDITION LEAD: You're going to ask me that multiple times? Ugh.

TRANSCRIBER: What are you looking for?

TRANSCRIBER NOTE: (Oh, here we go. The man's puffed up again. Like a pigeon pretending to be a peacock.)

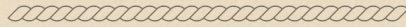
EXPEDITION LEAD: Why, we're looking for answers, of course! There are so many extant questions about the Devil's Spine...from the curious scientific wonders in the water, to the mysterious ruins that jut from the waves. I aim to be the first person to conduct a thorough exploration of the region.

TRANSCRIBER: I see.

EXPEDITION LEAD: Maybe with a better sense of the area, we'll see fewer fatal crashes in the Spine.

TRANSCRIBER NOTE: (I did not snort. Whatever the Lead's journal might suggest.)

TRANSCRIBER: How altruistic.



[The currents have gotten stronger. The water swirls faster. A half-slip of paper tumbles, far from the wrecked reminder of where it originated.]

TRANSCRIBER: What are you looking for?

CAPTAIN: Don't ask me that.

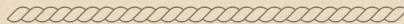
TRANSCRIBER: Why?

CAPTAIN: I...I'm not proud of the answer. It wasn't worth it—never should have been worth it. At least I'll know the face of my sin, sight unseen, when it takes me down below. It might be plain and ugly, but at least it's mine.

TRANSCRIBER: Ah. Thank you for your honesty on this matter.

TRANSCRIBER NOTE: (I'll leave the interview here for the moment. It'll be no matter to chip away at this resolve tonight, once I've gotten a couple drinks in him. Maybe it'll teach him not to overindulge so often.)

CAPTAIN: You were right, in the end. You've always been right. Damn you.



[Fragments of paper have adhered together, jagged at the edges and plastered with rime, ink lifted and running, binding a new conversation from what had been written. Thin strips interlaced. Line by line. Speaker by speaker. Across time, between moments. Renewed and upcycled.]

TRANSCRIBER: I've given you an interview already, so let's just skip to the questions.

NATURALIST: Of course. Will they be the same?

[The waves stick and churn the writings.]

TRANSCRIBER: Yes. Exactly—here, let me just—alright. What brought you to the expedition?

CRYPTOZOOLOGIST: I know there's more out there than we've dreamt. More than we've seen, more than the human eye is ready for. I've always wanted to be on the cutting edge of human knowledge. And well—if people think I'm caught up in fantasy—that's fine. There's something out there, though, and I want to be part of it.

[The composite page flips and tumbles.]

NATURALIST: I wrote a grant. Got a good chunk of the funding that made the trip possible. Specimens from this region are almost unheard of in my academic circles, and I have a fascinating theory on the evolution of life on sea-mounts that can only be corroborated with some high-quality Cusk Eel samples. And they're impossible to get ahold of without the requisite volcanic activity.

[Line by line.]

CRYPTOZOOLOGIST: Hang on—what's that thing in the water?

[Across time.]

NATURALIST: I haven't found many specimens lately. And the ones that the nets have brought in seem....chewed.

[Between moments.]

CRYPTOZOOLOGIST: Oh god. It's getting closer—I'm—I'll just sit over here instead. Look, I—I...think it might have been a bad idea to come here. We need to leave.

[Something new is made.]

NATURALIST: I can't wait to show my colleagues what I brought in today. Well, it was the nets—no, I brought it in. Take a look at this—have you ever seen anything like it?

TRANSCRIBER NOTE: (At this point, the Cryptozoologist—poor dear looks more frazzled every interview—broke into the room blubbering, door creaking limply on its hinges behind her, as something sturdy struck the bottom of the boat from below. The bastard Captain had better not have been drinking again. I lost hold of my pen, and so was unfortunately unable to record for a moment, so now all I can remember is the Cryptozoologist's broken sobs as she begged the Naturalist to throw the child—the *specimen*—back into the water. Dear reader—it was not a child. It was merely a particularly nasty looking fish. Ghastly thing, really, with gnashing teeth and hungry maw. An appetite twice its size. Nearly as starved as the public for a good story—I digress. Nevertheless, we'll finish this interview another day. One way or another, I will make it to print.)

[Renewed.]

TRANSCRIBER: What are you looking for? Has it changed?

[Made in the margins.]

CRYPTOZOOLOGIST: I want to go home.

[Brought centerstage.]

NATURALIST: I...see now. I *am* home.



[A bitter page rebukes all attempts to read it. It wallows there in the shallows.]

TRANSCRIBER: What are you looking for? Has it changed?

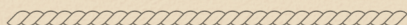
EXPEDITION LEAD: I wasn't looking for this! I wanted to help—I'll fucking admit it, I was looking for heroics, but now they won't stop watching with their starving eyes! I don't want this! Leave—leave me alone! Go back to your cabin—and stop that damned writing!

TRANSCRIBER NOTE: (I should stop by the Medic after I finish extracting what I need from this interview. I've become so itchy lately—perhaps a sunburn?)

[Thick ink bleeds across a deep scar in the page, a near-rupture.]

TRANSCRIBER NOTE: (The Expedition Lead made an attempt to grab my pen. He was not successful.)

EXPEDITION LEAD: *You're letting them see inside us.*



[There are fragments of the ephemera, written and recorded observations from the shipwreck, which will never be found by human hands. Which have disintegrated in the face of the sea's unrelenting force. And even these paltry recovered scraps have been ripped to pieces.]

TRANSCRIBER NOTE: (I—damnit, why am I still sticking to this format? I've transcended the need for such limitations—whatever I write here will surely make it to print. I've done it—there's nothing in my career that will top what I've found here.

And my thanks to my ravenous public for leading me right to it! Sure, I had some difficulties finding the right specimens, but oh, how I've succeeded beyond the Expedition Lead's wildest dreams. That man didn't know what he was doing—he didn't push far enough. His name, sweet and heavy in the mouths of thankful grieving mothers...He wanted to make those hefty promises. "Never again." Pah. Pathetic.

I knew there was a story here. Attention is truly the master of all game animals, and here the harvest could be easily gathered, with the proper motivations—and how could anyone not fixate on such an exotic locale?

Besides, his silly little ramblings were never going to make it to print. The man jumped at shadows and acted like those were the blind whale that we've been hunting. That I've been hunting. Since, after all, I was the only one with the forethought to ask any of the locals, and oh—my questions were rewarded.

[Were it not for a local fisherman with a dredging rig on the back of his boat, these fragments of paper would have been lost like all the rest.]

I will have to find that man, and thank him for the gift he has given me. Perhaps he'd like a credit when my interviews are published—though I'm sure he'll understand why I'm not sharing the byline. It wasn't like he did any of the work, after all.

TRANSCRIBER: What are you looking for?

What—wait a minute. Who are you? What are you—this can't be happening, not like this! Not now! Leave! This is for me alone! I have spilled myself across these pages, there is nothing left to pry open.

TRANSCRIBER: What are you looking for? Has it changed?

Why are you here? How are you here? The light—the light—the new-old thing shining there, spinning there, flickering with dying embers—should have sent you away! Exposed it all! I did

everything right. The sky mocks me. Open and empty. It mocks me.

[If these fragments had been lost, truly lost...wouldn't that be tragic?]

TRANSCRIBER: Has it changed?

If I answer, will you leave me alone? Please, leave me alone. Mother, please! Yes—I am changed—but I want—I'm so hungry. The hollows—the vessel. See me. Fill me.

[The article concludes here, rotted and desiccated, ink bleeding sluggishly from cracked parchment.]







THE STEAMSHIP
LEVIATHAN
DAY 1
STELLAR BASIN

DAY 2
CLIFFS

Five Pantoons

Viedai

The Traveller had a dream, once, a dream she carried in her heart ever since she was small. And in pursuit of that dream, she had a place as a hand on a cargo ship. The food was bad and the pay was worse, but in exchange for one year of her life—signed away in a scribble of ink—she spent her days sailing the coasts of the southern ocean and visiting its myriad isles. Exotic ports, fascinating peoples, strange new lands, waking each morning to the possibilities of an unexplored horizon beneath a bright, swift sunrise—

For such things, there was no price the Traveller would not gladly pay.

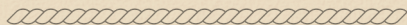
Then, one night, the ship ran aground in the fog north of the Marrows, leagues away on the map from where any rock or reef should be. The hull came apart like shattering glass, its jagged pieces disappearing into the smooth, black water as if dragged by an unseen force.

The Traveller was thrown into the sea. Screams from the other crew members surrounded her, but no matter which way she swam she could not find any of them. She treaded water, praying for daybreak. One by one, the cries of the crew fell silent, until at last the Traveller was alone in the dark and the swirling fog.

She didn't know how long she floated in the emptiness. Minutes. Days. Centuries. Cold seeped into her bones. Her strength gave out. Finally, she slipped beneath the surface, her dream sinking with her.

I wanted to see the world, she thought as she drifted into the depths.

And down in the abyss, something heard her.



The Traveller woke, surprised she was waking at all.

And then she opened her eyes.

And she opened her eyes.

And her eyes. And her eyes.

And her eyes—

She was fetched up against rocks beneath towering cliffs of basalt. She was washed ashore on the sandy beach of a coral lagoon. She was tangled in mangrove roots. She was frozen to an ice floe. She was caught between ruined pillars beneath a charred, crimson sky.

She saw all of these places at once—impossibly, at once. All five of her mouths ripped open and in five voices she screamed.



When the Traveller pieced her mind back together, she discovered that one of her...her *bodies* had been moved. After several tries, she

managed to close eight of her ten eyes so she could focus on that body's surroundings. With even greater effort, she convinced it to sit up. For the correct pair of hands to brace it. For the attached head to turn and look.

She was laying atop a pitted marble altar at the heart of an ancient temple. A bubbling, steaming sea stretched around her in all directions. Mountains loomed in the distance, the air stank of sulfur, and her damp clothes were stiff with salt.

Worse, she was not alone.

A strange little man squatted beside the altar. Sickly pale, balding, and dressed in a dirty robe, he looked upon her with bulging eyes aflame with religious fervor. Chitinous growths like fish scales ran up the lengths of his bare arms.

Who are you? the Traveller asked. But the lips and tongue she used to speak those words were fifty leagues distant. *Where am I?* she cried out with another mouth half an ocean away from the first.

"Help me!" she begged, and this time her voice echoed off the temple's broken columns.

The man cackled. "You are beyond any help or hindrance, o fortunate one. Our masters have named you Chosen, *remade* you as Their ordained Watcher. Your fate belongs only to Them, now."

"Chosen—?"

"Like me. Plucked from the ignorant masses to serve as the instrument of Their purpose. Called forth to prepare for Their coming." He grinned, revealing long, yellowed teeth and blackened gums.

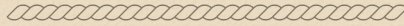
"I don't understand. What's going on? What's happened to me?" Shivering, the Traveller drew her canvas coat tight about her

shoulders. Her body out on the ice seemed to be dying of exposure, losing heat faster than the one laying in full sunlight on the coral beach could replenish it. The tide was coming in, too, lapping threateningly against the parts of her that were still lost amongst the tree roots and huddled at the foot of the stone cliffs. "Please, what am I...?" she whispered.

The little man looked at her, and as she watched, his smile wavered at the edges. He almost seemed afraid. "It is not easy, being Chosen. They ask...so much of you. So much. So very much." He twitched an arm towards a stone basin piled with scraps of driftwood. "Make yourself a fire, Watcher. Warm yourself up. We shall speak again anon."

In the years that followed, the Traveller would come to realize that was the first and the last time the so-called Fanatic of the Devil's Spine was ever kind to her, and also the last time she saw him doubt. One final, guttering flame of his humanity, she supposed, before his creeping madness snuffed it out.





It took a long while for the Traveller to learn to coordinate herself. She had twenty limbs now, fifty fingers, ten eyes, five tongues, five *heads*, with her single mind suspended between them like a spider at the center of a web, caught in a kaleidoscope of sights and sounds and sensations. In the future, she would be able to effortlessly haggle with customers with one body while also fishing, steering her pontoon, repairing a hull, and retrofitting an engine, but so soon after her rebirth she could only focus on her own survival.

Her body in the Pale Reach slept for all the rest. Its copy of her coat was too thin for the bitter cold and biting wind, so she entombed it in a snow cave, waking it only twice a day to keep it from freezing solid. Similarly, her body in the Stellar Basin did nothing but hunt and eat to keep all the others alive. In the Twisted Strand, meanwhile, she collected debris that had been captured by the mangroves; she had a vague plan to build a raft, head out to sea, and regather her splintered selves.

Most of her mental energies were spent on the body in the Gale Cliffs. Cognizant of her unchanged need for clothing, medicine, and money, she made her way to Ingfell and took whatever odd jobs she could. She fetched, she cleaned, she carried. The townsfolk observed her stumbling gait and faraway expression and often whispered to each other behind their hands when she passed. They thought they knew what was wrong with her, but they did not know.

They must never know.

Out of all her bodies, the one in the Devil's Spine had the most important task of all. With it, she dogged the footsteps of the Fanatic through the ruins. On the days he seemed almost lucid, she picked his brain for answers.

You said I was a 'Watcher.' What, precisely, am I to watch for?

“For my disciple, for my successor! For the next Herald of the Purge. Ah, that he should appear before me now, so that I might behold his glory—!”

How can I recognize this Herald?

“Shadows rooted within his mind. Seawater in his veins. You shall look upon him, and you shall know him.”

And if I find him, what then? What must I do?

“Send him to me. But tell him not of his destiny. Merely...guide him. As I was guided, once.” A tarnished chain dangled from Fanatic’s hand. Cradled within his palm, a disc of silver and fogged glass ticked with a living heartbeat. “He must come to this temple to witness the rite of purification, and thus take up my mantle.”

He seems important.

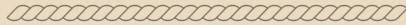
The Fanatic threw back his head. His fishlike eyes rolled in their sockets. “Yea, for he shall be the last!” he shrieked. “The last, and the greatest! It is by his hand that the doors of the deep shall again be opened. And through his conviction, thrown wide to allow the passage of our masters. On that blessed day, rejoice! Rejoice! The seas, the skies, the very bones of the earth—all that is and was shall forevermore be Their kingdom!”

Tears rolled down his cheeks as he wept and laughed as one.



It sounded like...the end of the world.

It sounded like the end of the world and she would have nothing to do with it.



That night, all five of the Traveller's bodies fell into a strange sleep. She dreamed of sailing away, of leaving behind the corners of the ocean where she had been set as sentry.

She dreamed of her bodies collapsing like marionettes with their strings cut. Saw creeping, crawling things emerging from the water to gnaw at her flesh. Felt her mind fracture, unable to die, forever bound to her bones. She had become less than the meanest ghost, a scream on the wind, each passing moment a new agony—

When she awoke in the morning, she understood the truth.

Though she had been raised from the depths, she had not been saved from them.



Since she could not leave her islands to search for the new Herald, it would be prudent to set up some kind of shop, the Traveller thought. One that could funnel as many customers—people—before her as possible. But how could she secure the capital for it?

To that end, she learned to leverage her strange, split existence. She never did quite figure out how it worked, but she could swing a hammer in the Pale Reach, strike a nail in the Devil's Spine, and drive it to fix the slats of a crab pot in the Stellar Basin. She could buy a harpoon from an old whaler in the Gale Cliffs, pass it from one hand to another, and offer it a moment later to the marooned airman in the Twisted Strand. She could purchase fish in regions where they were plentiful and, before they had even grown stale, sell them in places where they were not.

Thus, job by job, trade by trade, her fortunes expanded.

In surprisingly little time, the Traveller was able to gather the funds to acquire the tools and materials she needed. After a flurry of buying and building, she at last obtained what she'd been striving for: five identical pontoons, each with a dock, a shipyard, and iceboxes for a tiny, floating fish market.

She moored her new pontoons near the outskirts of her five islands. She painted up signs, turned on all her lights, and then settled down to await her first customers.

The "Travelling Merchant" was open for business.



She thought it best to pretend to still be human. *We're merely five sisters*, she told puzzled visitors. *Close enough in age that we all appear alike.*

As the years passed, though, she made careful mistakes. She greeted by name customers whom she should have never met. She picked up the threads of conversations begun a hundred leagues away. She left her belongings—tools with distinctive wear marks, unique trinkets—where curious eyes might spot them.

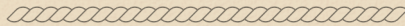
She had hoped the denizens of the southern ocean would come for her with steel and gunpowder once they realized what she was—but they never did. There were many strange things at sea in those days, and while the islanders and sailors did eventually discover her to be *unnatural*, they also deemed her *useful*. She was a light in the fog. A safe harbor the creatures of the night would not go near.

And they, in their folly, knew nothing of her task.

She dutifully studied the face of every fresh customer, searching for saltwater and shadows. *I'm looking for an oarfish, a gulper eel*, she told each one casually. *A tigerfish. A coelacanth. Reckon you could find them for me?* The same words every time. She promised no reward.

It was the smallest obedience she dared, an easily missed trail of breadcrumbs that led to a ruined temple and the doom of the world. Sometimes, when she slept, she felt the spiderwebs of her mind thrum with the presence of the ancient, inevitable things that had remade her. They never punished her for her lack of enthusiasm, though. Never admonished her.

Perhaps her efforts were sufficient for Their purposes. Perhaps she was still beneath Their notice, and Their wrath was still to come. She couldn't decide which prospect she feared more.



The setting sun had disappeared behind the peaks of the Devil's Spine, and the smoke-filled sky was dimming like an ember burning out. As she leaned upon the handle of her mop, contemplating her newest repair contract, the Travelling Merchant heard a splash behind her. She glanced over to spy the Fanatic hoisting himself out of the water and onto the half-swabbed deck of her pontoon.

"The Herald—my successor," the little man croaked as he clambered to his feet. "Have you sought him? Have you found him?" The scales had grown further down his arms since last she had seen him, his eyes swelled rounder, his mouth stretched wider. The two of them were matched in their monstrousness, she supposed, but at least her own faces did not so plainly betray what she had become.

Shuddering, she looked away. Looked elsewhere.

Churning stormclouds blocked her view of the sunset in the Gale Cliffs. Slashes of lightning cleaved the air as the serpent-gnawed mountains shouted back echoes of thunder. In the Pale Reach, it already had been dark for hours; from the safety of her cabin, she could hear the polar winds howling across the ice. The yellow haze of the Twisted Strand, however, was filled with the chatter of insects and animals settling down for the night.

Unlike the other islands to which she had been bound, the Stellar Basin was ablaze with color. The beaches sparkled beneath high clouds of purple and pink and gold, the sun a great fireball sinking into the sea. Pair by pair, the Travelling Merchant closed her faraway eyes so that she could drink in the light of that shining horizon. Forever unexplored. Forever out of reach.

“Well?” the Fanatic asked again impatiently. “Have you found him?”

The wind in the Devil’s Spine tasted like ashes.

“No,” the Travelling Merchant whispered. “Not yet.”

She prayed she never would.



messages in a bottle
DLC CHAPTER





Heart of Winter

Onlybythestars

There were eight of us.

Most o' the others were well-seasoned already, but not me. I'd only been on one voyage so far, a little cargo run between Greater Marrow an' Ingfell. Gettin' picked to be on such a crew for my second time out shocked me. Later I'd wish I hadn't been picked, but at the time I was o'er the moon.

'Course, we knew there'd be risks. Every sailor had heard the stories about the Pale Reach. How whenever the fog got thick as pea soup, the ice would appear out o' nowhere, an' you never knew when it'd disappear again. More'n one ship had gone down that way, gods rest the souls of their crews. So yeah, there was an undercurrent o' that tension in everyone. The sea has never been a kind mistress, even less so when her heart is made o' ice.

But we were excited, too. Bein' han'picked for the survey expedition, the first one o' its kind, with the chance to really make names for ourselves when we sailed back with the truth about the Pale Reach sittin' in our hold? No man could pass that up. Even knowin' I'd only be doin' stuff like swabbin' the deck an' helpin' to clean the galley couldn't take the wind out o' my sails. We were gettin' to be a part o' making history, an' that was enough of an honor for me. I had nothin' but trust in the Captain an' the rest of the crew.

If only I'd known.

But I'm gettin' ahead of myself.

We set sail on an otherwise unremarkable day, pullin' out o' port as the sun shone down on us an' a fine wind filled our sails. I recall the Captain bein' happy about that, as it'd save our engines' power for when we really needed it in the fog. There were some clouds in the sky, but nothin' threatenin', an' lots o' shouts o' joy from everyone aboard. Lots o' singin', too, once we really got underway. People talk about bad omens when somethin' terrible's about to happen, but here's the hard truth for you: you don't always get 'em. Most o' the time, you don't know what's comin'. We sure didn't.

Things started off slow. After an uneventful journey, we pulled up to a wasteland o' ice an' enough fog to blot out all the stars. The Captain ordered us to moor against the outer ice wall, so the engineers could make adjustments to prepare the ship for what lay ahead. We were all freezin' our arses off an' just wanted to hunker down in our bunks, but orders are orders. So we got to it, grumblin' all the way as we worked into the night. It got dark so quick it felt like the clocks were lyin' to us. Someone—an' we all agreed with 'im—said it was like winter's the only season that existed here. The ship's calendar said it was the beginnin' o' summer, but I guess nobody let the Reach know about that.

I dunno what hour it was when we finally finished. All I know is that my berth felt like the finest feather bed after all o' that toil in the wet an' cold. I don't even recall fallin' asleep, that's how tuckered out I was.

So I ne'er heard it comin'.

Nobody alive today saw what happened any more'n I did. We just heard that bell, dredgin' us out o' sleep an' ringin' like it were heraldin' the end o' the world. Felt like we were still dreamin' as we ran to the deck.

Sometimes when I close my eyes, I can still see it: that glowin' horn aimed at our hull, the huge body whippin' through the water.

All those eyes.

All those *teeth*.

I barely remember anythin' else, but I remember I froze. Everyone around me was runnin', though. Yellin'. Weren't till the Captain hisself screamed in my face to get movin' that I thawed.

I ran like the others, scrabblin' for anythin' I could get my hands on, barely knowin' what I was doin'. My ears rang with all the shouts, everyone screamin' bloody murder. My feet slipped on the deck as it pitched an' tossed, an' I dunno how I didn't fall. Or maybe I did an' I don't remember. I just remember that I couldn't see anyone else through the fog, an' I didn't know who'd still be breathin' when we got out o' it. Every time a wave hit me, I thought I was gonna drown. Thought we'd all die in the deep, impaled on that shiny horn.

Then someone thought o' throwin' fish at it.

It left a trail in the water as we whipped the ship around, so I thought the demon'd catch up an' eat us too, but it didn't. Our bribe slowed it down long enough for us to get away. The kinda miracle you rarely get, an' better say a prayer o' thanks for.

After that we maintained a sort o'... feedin' station, I reckon you'd call it. I got put on fishin' duty to keep it filled, while the rest o' the men set up a camp on the ice in the center o' the lagoon. Dawn hadn't quite reached us yet, but who could sleep after that? I sure had no intention o' tryin'.

Damndest thing, though, was how nobody stayed worried that long 'cept me. They teased me 'bout bein' wet behind the ears, an' then went back to talkin' 'bout seein' some lights in the ice an' how it had to be a sign o' buried treasure. I thought they'd breathed in too many fish guts, an' said so.

Not that anyone listened.

We were just s'posed to be a survey expedition, but those strange lights were gleamin' in everyone's eyes, an' you couldn't douse 'em. Captain's most of all. No surprise there—he'd get the lion's share o' anythin' we found, if we found anythin'. So off they went to dig, while I fished an' Cook kept the fires goin'. I was in charge o' keepin' that sea devil away from us, an' Cook kept ever'body fed. Simple enough. Excitin' enough if you look at it the right way.

Nothin' much happened at first, though. Just a lot o' fishin' on my part, an' diggin' an' tired men stumblin' in at mealtimes. They coulda ate somethin' at their little camp, but they wanted Cook's hot meals. Can't blame 'em.

Then one day, the Bos'n showed up all bloodshot an' wore out. I knew they weren't gettin' many breaks, so that didn't surprise me. He was twitchy, too, lookin' 'round like he 'spected somethin' to jump out o' the shadows. I figured it was the memory of that demon fish an' went 'bout my business.

Cook was the type to worry 'bout the men, though. So he started askin' questions in a real low voice. I didn't hear much o' what the Bos'n said; somethin' about noises in the ice. An' sure, if you're diggin' in it, the ice is gonna start crackin'. I didn't think much o' that either, not even when Cook went paler'n snow. Prob'ly should've, but I didn't.

I went back to fishin' before I saw the end o' it. I'm told the Captain came up an' interrupted, wantin' to talk to the Bos'n alone, but I never saw it. I just remember the Captain splittin' the crew up the next day. He sent the bos'n east, the navigator west, an' the first officer south, an' he hisself would go 'tween them to check on things. All I could think about was the danger from the narwhal, an' I spoke out o' turn. The Captain weren't too pleased with me, I'll tell you that much. Not that I'd expected him to be.

But somethin' 'bout his reaction chilled my blood all the same. I couldn't put my finger on it then, an' I still can't explain it now. His eyes—I don't like rememberin' the look in 'em.

They were like that ice with the lights in. So cold I could practically see my breath in 'em. If I was a religious man, I'd say he got possessed by somethin' beyond this world, beyond my ken to know. Maybe he was. I dunno what I believe in, but I think... well, I think there's gotta be *somethin'* out there. Just dunno what. Maybe even multiple somethin's. Prob'ly nothin' good, though. If you disagree, you're welcome to sail out there an' see what I saw. See if it don't alter your thinkin' a bit.

In any case, the Captain told me not to question his orders, an' to just stay put while the others headed off. They were surveyin', like we'd come to do, an' there weren't enough crew or supplies to go to each spot together one at a time, so they had to split up. Meanwhile me'n Cook an' the pair o' engineers would hang back an' wait, keep things shipshape. Those were our duties, an' we were expected to fulfill 'em.

Man had a strange gleam in his eye when he asked if'n I was clear on that. All I could do was nod an' tell him 'yes, sir'.

We fell into somethin' of a routine after that. Just the four of us, waitin' for the others to come back. I fished, Cook cooked, the engineers occupied themselves best they could. Even with just half a crew, it never got too quiet.

We *couldn't* let it get too quiet.

I can't explain to you how the solitude o' the sea will get to a man's mind. Not if you haven't lived it. They say there's a certain kind o' madness that falls on a man on a long voyage, makin' him jump at shadows.

This weren't that.

We saw—I don't even know what we saw. Lights in the dark. Shapes in the fog. Not ones that matched that horned beastie, neither. An' if we let the quiet grow, we'd hear stuff. Whispers. Murmurs. We tried to explain it as jus' the wind howlin', but the sea was still more often'n not.

So we spoke. Laughed. Lied. Anythin' to fill that silence. Anythin' but admit to what was goin' on.

If you're thinkin' o' sayin' we shoulda done somethin' different—don't. I heard it before, an' I've gone over it in my own head too. The only thing I can say that brings me any kinda peace is that we did our best with what we had. An' that even if we'd had more, none o' it woulda stopped a thing from happenin' the way it did.

Not that I'll ever know exactly what that was. But you take what you can get.

In any case, we kept right on waitin' till Cook started gettin' nervous about our provisions. An' then, after a little arguin', we got the ship goin' an' headed off to look for the others. We were closest to the central camp where the Captain had been stayin', so we went there first.

What we found was... well, I s'pose some would say it was straight out o' a nightmare.

They'd be right.

When I tell you the Captain was gone... I don't mean he weren't there. He was.

He's still there, far as I know.

An' I ain't goin' back to check.

After he sailed off that day, I ne'er saw him alive again. None o' us did. We saw what was left o' him, though: that dark shape in the ice, the one that'd sprung up in that lil' cabin like a spot o' mold on food. I ne'er saw his face in all that ice, but Cook swore he did, his face goin' the color o' the snow again.



We ne'er did make sense of his log, neither. We left it in the cabin— Cook swore it'd be bad luck to bring aboard, an' I agreed. There was somethin' dark in those words, somethin' like what I'd seen in Captain's eyes, an' I wanted to be far away from it.

We figured it'd prob'ly be the same with the others, but we went anyway. Maybe, we told each other, there'd be someone shiverin' an' starvin' an' waitin' for us to come get 'em. We all knew it weren't likely, but if we didn't try, it'd haunt us all our days, thinkin' 'bout

somebody we aban'oned to die out there.

Weren't us what abandoned 'em, though.

Weren't us what killed 'em.

Couple of 'em—the bos'n, the navigator—left behind notes that didn't make any more sense to us than the Captain's log. If the first officer wrote anythin' down, it weren't there. As for the men themselves...

... may whatever gods watch o'er the seas keep their souls at peace.

You know the rest by now, I 'spect. Shaken by what we'd seen, we sailed back out o' the ice an' headed north. Headed home. The sun came out on our way, an' it felt like our bodies were finally thawin'.

Our hearts an' minds, though... that's a different story. In a way, we were still in all that ice an' fog, seein' our captain an' our crewmates as frozen shadows, not knowin' what did that to 'em. Not knowin' if they screamed the way they did the night the narwhal struck, or if they went quick an' quiet. Not knowin' what to do for 'em but pray.

In a way, that's where we still are.

I finished growin' up, an' kept on sailin'. I still loved the sea, an' I still do. There's been some joys in my life, make no mistake. But I've ne'er forgotten even for a moment what I saw out there, an' I've tried to make sure no one else ever has either.

I've told an' retold the story a million times to anyone who'll listen, keepin' the tale alive so that the dead are never disturbed. So there aren't any more to join 'em. The others do the same. An' when we can, we mark the anniversary of that ill-fated voyage. Mostly it's just us bein' in our cups, talkin' about what we saw, but it's enough. It's enough to be around the ones who know. Who understan'. You look into their eyes, an' you don't have to explain. You just know. That you aren't mad, no matter how you feel after seein' what we saw. It's somethin' we all need.

If you take anythin' from my tale, let it be this: do not seek whatever treasure drove our crewmates to their end. Don't risk your lives tryin' to succeed where they failed. I dunno what's in that ice field, but it ain't worth any more death. It weren't worth what death there's already been. Remember that.

Remember: there were eight of us.

An' now there are four.





Foreman's Log

Hope

7th March

As is usual for these sorts of jobs, I'll be keeping a daily log of any happenings with the rig's construction and eventual operation—the good, the bad, and the ugly. This isn't my first time on one of these, of course. Doubt old Ironhaven would have put me in charge of running the show if it was!

Fact of the matter is, I've been at this a good long while. You learn a few things if you're working long enough. I'm not fool enough to think like some of the men and a few of the more experienced foremen around that, so long as everything goes as it's meant to, no one's ever going to read these words. Someone always does. Now, whether anyone will CARE about what I've written here? That's going to depend on whether I do a damn good job, or a piss-poor one, or something in between. Hell, if I do a good enough job as foreman, maybe they'll promote me. If I do a bad enough job, I'll be a cautionary tale for the foremen who come after me.

I happen to like my job the way it is, so I'll be striving for mediocrity. Not too good, not too bad. Just right there in the middle.

Initial crew's arrived with the first load of materials. We start construction tomorrow.

8th March

Construction's proceeding according to plan and on schedule. One minor injury from operator error.

I've some concerns about inventory, but so long as the supply ships keep arriving on schedule, we'll manage with what we've got.

12th March

Ahead of schedule—and out of construction materials. Supply ship's not due until the morrow. Granted permission to some of the men to pay the locals a visit. Not back yet at time of writing.

13th March

Locals are VERY SUPERSTITIOUS. The men have been laughing and joking about their tales all day. Ghost ships, noises from the deep, waterspouts out of nowhere when the weather's not suited for them...

Scheduled supply ship didn't arrive today, which isn't helping.

14th March

Supply ship arrived. It's a day behind schedule and with half the construction materials promised. The crew couldn't leave fast enough, but refused to explain why. Promised the next ship will have double.

They'd damn well better. I'm a foreman, not a miracle worker.

20th March

Supply ship not arrived yet. Construction's slowing and crew morale is at a low. Three minor injuries, two from operator error and one the men collectively refuse to elaborate on. I can only assume drinking was involved.

21st March

Supply ship still not arrived yet. Men have stopped joking about local superstitions and started refusing to venture too close to the water after nightfall. Have never known a group of working men to stick so religiously to curfew.

Took a look outside myself, out of what I can only call morbid curiosity. Pleased to report there's nothing to worry about. It's foggier out there than it was the night before, but it'll clear up once the sun rises, and I'd be more surprised if the rig DIDN'T creak at night.

22nd March

Supply ship arrived nearly 72 hours behind schedule. Had the promised double supplies so I can't complain too much. In even more of a hurry to leave than the last crew—they nearly left one of their men here with us!

26th March

One of the men went to the highest point we've built so far and jumped. He might have survived the impact if it wasn't the middle of the night. Only found what was left of him the next morning.

Poor man. What drove him to this?

27th March

Supply ship arrived on schedule this time. Again, crew couldn't leave fast enough, and did the single sloppiest unloading job I've seen in years. The Scientist arrived with them, he seemed

unaffected by the superstitions. Will enjoy working with someone reasonable.

30th March

Four minor injuries, one major—all operator error except the one. Hopefully he'll recover with time, as he's too badly hurt to be moved far. We're behind schedule but can make up the time later but with the men on edge enough as it stands, I had to end the workday early or risk further decreases in morale.

It's that damned fear of the water again. There is, for the last time, NOTHING IN THE WATER. Nothing that's not meant to be there, anyhow.

3rd April

No sign of the next supply ship. Scientist suggested sourcing construction materials from the locals. Did not have time or desire to explain why that was a terrible idea.

The crew are superstitious enough as is. The man who jumped was the last one back when they went out to visit the locals.

4th April

Supply ship not arrived yet. Crew claiming there's something in the water again, but refuse to specify or agree on what. Scientist agreed with them, but claimed it was nothing to worry about. Did not reassure the men. Will keep him away from them in future. He doesn't need to give them more bad ideas.

5th April

STILL no sign of the ship. Construction's stalled. Even if we could source materials from the locals—I have my doubts anything in the region would be specialized enough—none of the men are willing to go near a boat. Scientist would be, but company regs insist he can't go out alone. I'm the only one who would be willing to accompany him, and I'm required to stay with the rig until construction's complete and we're fully operational.

Starting to wonder if we'll ever be.

6th April

Scientist did something last night with the water. Didn't sleep a wink and I'd bet the men didn't either. Five minor injuries from maintenance alone.

Will be strongly encouraging the man to keep to his lab from here on out.

7th April

Where the hell is that ship?

8th April

As of today, the supply ship's a week overdue. Nothing else that I haven't covered already in some form or another.

9th April

Scientist attempted to enlist some of the men to assist him. Ignored my orders to stay away from the crew. Fortunately the men know better than to ignore my orders to stay away from him.

I put little stock in rumors, but with how long he's been with Ironhaven, there's all sorts going around involving him. Rapidly losing my patience and beginning to wonder if there might be a reason for that.

They say he destroyed his best student's life over her research. That he's more ruthless than anyone else with Ironhaven. I'm beginning to see why.

13th April

There's something in the water.

14th April

Supply ship not arrived yet. I have no memory of writing the previous entry. Don't know why I would have bothered. We're on a rig in the ocean. It would, as I think I said before, be more noteworthy if there was NOTHING in the water.

15th April

Supply ship not arrived yet. Last supply ship arrived three weeks ago. Food stores dwindling and none of the men are willing to go fishing. We'll have to unless they'd rather starve out here.

Crew is beginning to realize that, too, and I'd like to think none of

us want to die out here. If they ask me... someone's going to have to.

16th April

I remain a foreman and not a miracle worker. Ironhaven's never done so badly by me before, so my current theory is that the supply ships have been sent off on schedule. Something's happening to them in transit, because the crews of those that did arrive were scared shitless of SOMETHING.

Something's in the water. Something that doesn't want us here. The things I hear at night... I've been telling myself for over a month now that it's just what the night sounds like here. But what if it isn't?

I'm not a superstitious man. I may be by the end of this.





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Name of Ship SS LEVIATHAN. Date of Departure JUL 24 1923. Where bound GREATER MARROW

Port of Departure STELLAR BASIN. Steamship Line IRONHAVEN LINE.

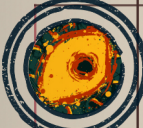
NAMES AND DESCRIPTIONS OF MESSAGES IN A BOTTLE CONTRIBUTORS
EMBARKED AT THE PORT OF STELLAR BASIN.

Contract Ticket Number.	NAME OF PASSENGERS	Profession, Occupation, or Calling of Passengers	Residence Records of Passengers
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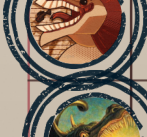
Crew on Board

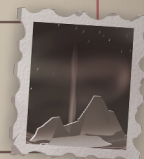
	Choca	Head Mod. Social Media Mod. Writer	t chocomd b chocomdwrites
	Ric	Art Mod. Cover Artist. Page Artist. Spot Artist (p. 33, 44, 49, 62, 102, 125, 135)	AmIsRic riwox
	Peaches	Organization Mod. Writer. Spot Artist (p.15, 18, 19, 20, 68, 75)	t itsmoonpeaches b itsmoonpeaches
	Epilogue	Graphics Mod. Page Artist. Merch Artist	t hereforanepilogue
	OceanMyth	Writing Mod. Writer	OceanMyth t justoceanmyth b ocean-myth
	Potentialforart	Formatting Mod. Assorted Pages Artist	potentialfa objectheadzine potentialforart

Passengers

	<i>Srrrokka-art</i>	Page Artist. Spot Artist (p.87)	 Srrrokka-art
	<i>Elasmosaurus</i>	Writer	 Elasmosaurus
	<i>Wryaves</i>	Felt Artist. Merch artist	 wryaves 
	<i>Ordinaryundead</i>	Page Artist	 ordinaryundead  ordinaryundead
	<i>Kai</i>	Writer	 kiwibrot  kiwibrot 
	<i>Jubjubmaz</i>	Comic Artist. Spot Artist (p.108)	 Jubjubmaz  Jubjubmaz
	<i>Astrid</i>	Writer	 honeyedjuniper  mangatamyg
	<i>PumpkinSoupe</i>	Page Artist	 pumpkinsoupe  pumpkinsoupe  pumpkinsoupe
	<i>Hope</i> 	Writer	 HopeStoryteller  ofstormsandfire  HopeStoryteller
	<i>Sleepy</i>	Writer	 Simply-sleepyhead

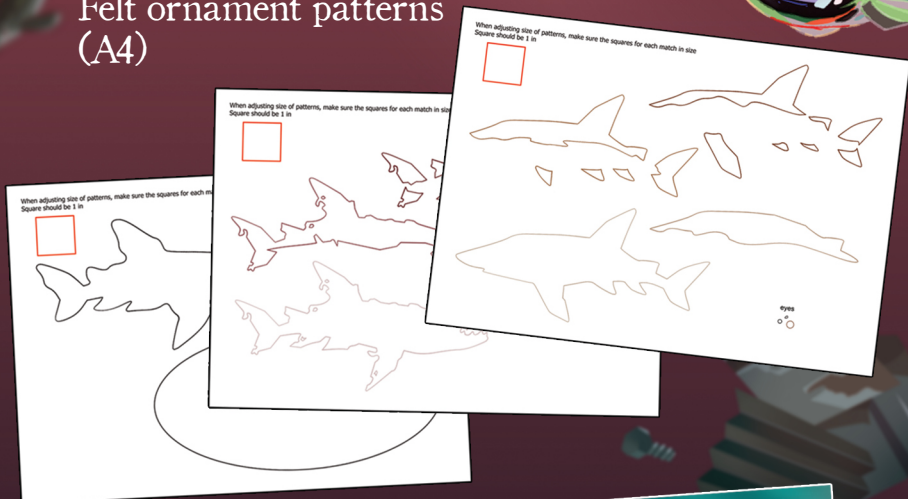
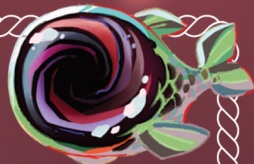
Passengers

	<i>Snowifer</i>	Page Artist	 snowifer  snowifer  snowiferart
	<i>Aster</i>	Page Artist	 asterrestrial  asterrestrial  asterrestrial
	<i>Raen</i>	Writer	 giffca
	<i>Enrji</i>	Page Artist	 zrllsyn  zrllsyn  zrllsyn-art
	<i>Rayenigma</i>	Page Artist	 ray_enigma  rayenigma
	<i>Viedai</i>	Writer	 7PhoenixAshes  AerinFH  AerinFH
	<i>IamUmaT</i>	Page Artist, Spot Artist (p.5)	 tamvmat  tamvmat
	<i>Onlybythestars</i>	Writer	 only_by_the_stars  only-by-the-stars  onlybythestars
	<i>Pigeon</i>	Page Artist	 chrissypigeon
	<i>Merlin M. (necroMatador)</i>	Merch Artist	 necromatador  necromatador  necromatador



Merch Gallery

Bronzer Whaler | Bloodskin Shark Felt ornament patterns (A4)

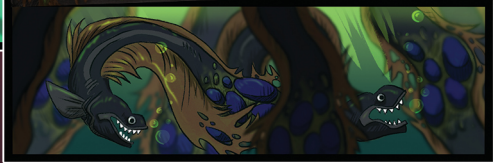
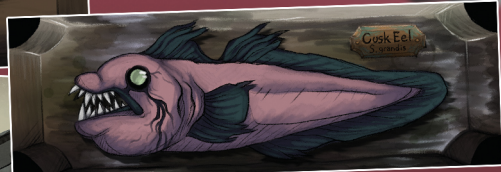
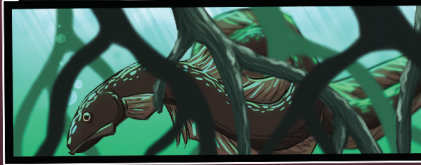
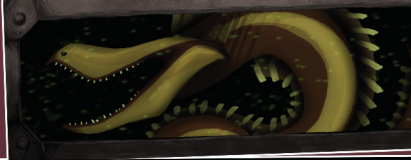


Wryaves

Felt ornament instructions (5 pages, A5)



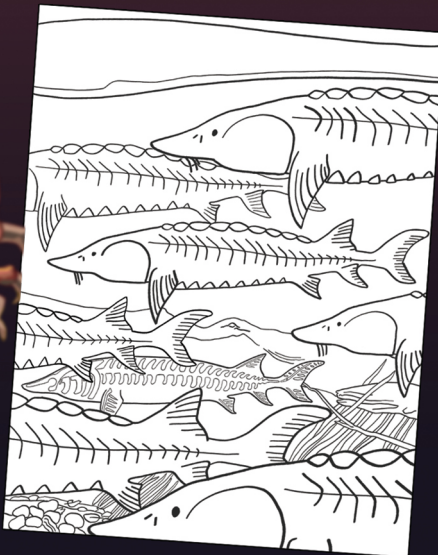
Merlin M.
(necroMatador)



Double-sided
bookmarks (A4)

Epilogue

Coloring page
(letter size)



Paper ruffles in your hands, rough with age and
infused with the mawkish scent of brine.

The glass bottle lies stuck in the sand at your feet.
A tiny crab taps its cracked surface with a curious
claw, and you wonder if this creature knows of the
words that were once trapped inside.

You hold the messages to your chest like a treasure.
Your heart beats in time with the tide.

Night is coming.

Now, you have a choice.

Will you share what you have read with the world,
or will you *forget*?

Many thanks to our crew of mods and contributors for their hard work in bringing this zine to life.

And thank *you*, reader, for coming along on this voyage.

We hope you enjoyed everything this zine has to offer!

- Mod Team
Messages in a Bottle



